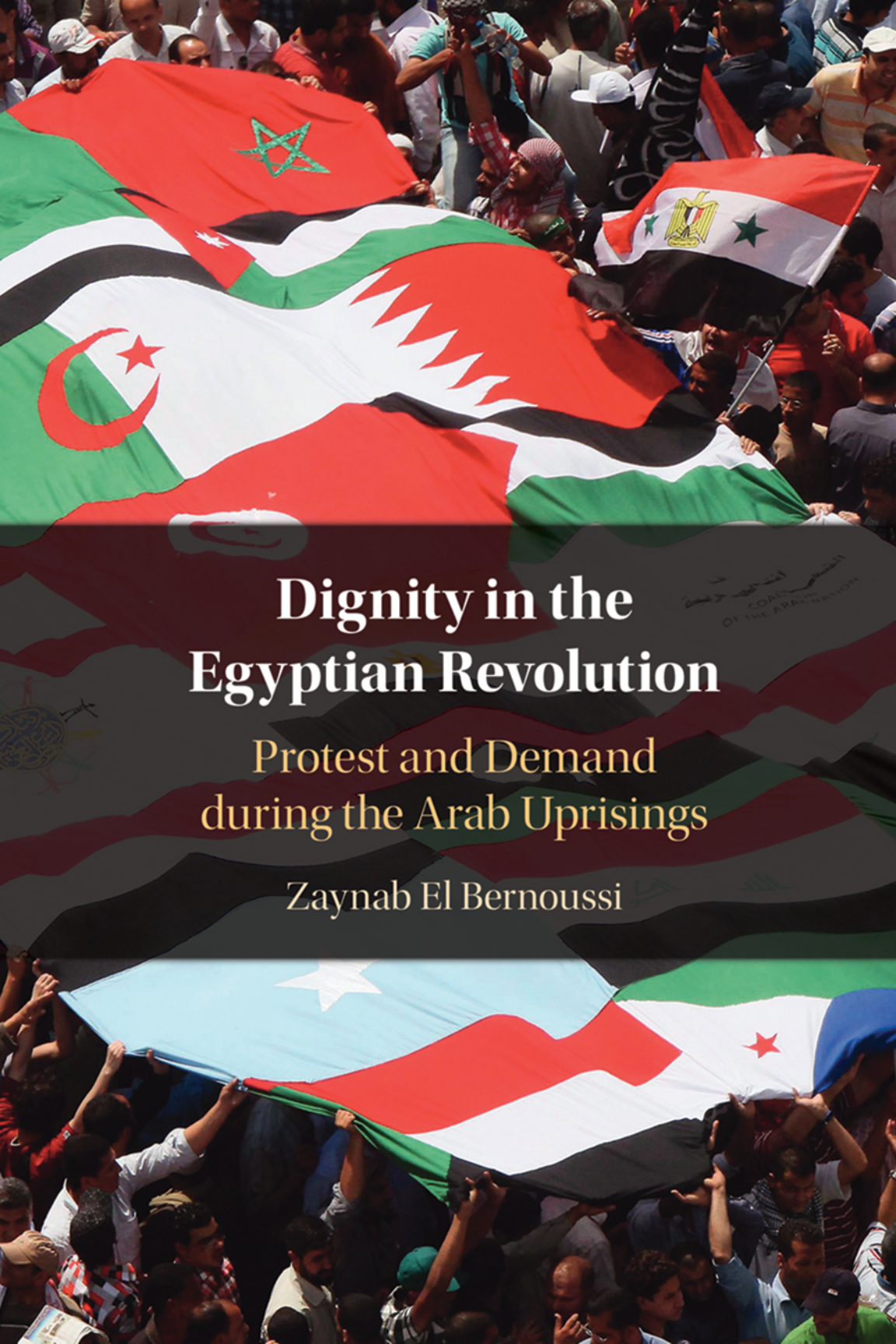




Dignity in the Egyptian Revolution

Protest and Demand
during the Arab Uprisings

Zaynab El Bernoussi



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Dignity in the Egyptian Revolution

Dignity, or *karama* in Arabic, is a nebulous concept that challenges us to reflect on issues such as identity, human rights and faith. During the Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011, Egyptians who participated in these uprisings frequently used the concept of dignity as a way to underscore their opposition to the Mubarak regime. Protesting against the indignity of the poverty, lack of freedom and social justice, the idea of *karama* gained salience in Egyptian cinema, popular literature, street art, music, social media and protest banners, slogans and literature.

Based on interviews with participants in the 2011 protests and analysis of the art forms that emerged during protests, Zaynab El Bernoussi explores understandings of the concept of dignity, showing how protestors conceived of this concept in their organization of protest and uprising, and their memories of *karama* in the aftermath of the protests, revisiting these claims in the years subsequent to the uprising.

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ZAYNAB EL BERNOUSSI

International University of Rabat



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*For Mahmoud Mohamed Elsaed Abdelmaksoud Abdelkarim
(b. September 2, 1991, d. October 24, 2017): I learned so
much from you. Thank you for revealing to me the
extraordinary courage of the Egyptian youth.*

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Foreword

In the two decades that I have been researching and working with dignity as an approach to understanding and resolving conflict, I have never encountered such a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the concept as this book by Professor Zaynab provides. Her goal was to ask people who were involved in the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt in 2011, their understanding of dignity (*karama* in Arabic) and how it factored into the reasons for the revolution.

She did not assume a universal, shared understanding of the concept. Instead, she relied on the *lived experience* of the people she interviewed. She listened carefully to the stories her respondents told. She was mindful not to impose her preconceived ideas about the relationship between dignity and the uprisings. Her approach to the research, in itself, was an honoring of the respondents' dignity. She created the space for them to be seen, heard, listened to and understood.

The book is filled with insight about how complex a role dignity played in Egypt in 2011. She challenged the idea that there was a coherent role that it played. She revealed that it was a multifaceted word that could mean different things to different people. For some, it was associated with human rights and the universalist idea that all human beings had value and worth. One young man said about *karama*: *Dignity is a crown over one's head*. For others, it was related to economic deprivation, unemployment, and poverty. The respondents who held these views felt that the humiliation that resulted from a lack of resources robbed people of their dignity. One response that I particularly liked was an interview with a man who lived on the streets with his wife and children who told her: *I want my three-year-old child to grow up with dignity and to find a job just like the President*. Others made connections with Islam and the belief that

karama is a gift from God. Another common theme centered on karama as an “Arabs’ problem.” Arabs suffer from a perceived lack of dignity and identity confusion, largely because of their colonial history.

All of the examples point to the necessity of understanding the deep cultural historical, economic, social and religious factors that influenced Zaynab’s respondents’ understanding of what lead to the 2011 protests. To be sure, she will convince the reader that the role karama played in the Arab Spring, in Egypt and elsewhere, was complex and nuanced.

Zaynab referred to the “emotional” dimension of dignity, particularly as it connects to Egyptian identity. The emotional toll of being treated as “less than” or inferior to others because of some aspect of one’s identity is immense. My research (from neuroscience) shows that when peoples’ dignity is violated, no matter how one understands it, it is experienced in the brain in the same area as a physical wound. It is traumatic to have one’s dignity violated even once. Humans react strongly to it. The anger and resentment are a normal reaction to being treated badly. Add to it the repeated and chronic denial of dignity, day after day, and the anger and resentment turn into protests and even revolutions. The way we treat one another matters. It behooves anyone in a leadership position, especially political leadership, to be sure that all citizens are treated with the dignity they deserve. There are serious consequences for not doing so, and Zaynab has so beautifully chronicled the lived experience of her interviewees, giving voice to the voiceless.

More generally, the price states pay for the failure to recognize the role karama plays in the lives of its people, no matter how one chooses to explain it or experience it, shows the powerful relationship between failed neoliberal postcolonial policies and the oppression that is felt along with economic deprivation. These political failures to deliver dignity are not unique to the uprisings in Egypt in 2011. Zaynab shows that these are global concerns. Indeed, her argument holds up in explaining the recent politics in the United States.

Many argue that unemployment and economic hardship for a large number of people who felt humiliated and ignored by the political elite gave rise to a wave of populist sentiment among many angered citizens. Add to it the protests against racism that filled the streets of every American city, even during a pandemic, and it is clear that people will put their lives on the line to preserve and protect their dignity.

The price that any government pays for trampling on people's dignity is not one to be ignored. Dignity matters and it matters that we understand it, protect it and promote it if democracy is going to survive. *There is no democracy without dignity.*

It is with great clarity, conviction and keen scholarship that Zaynab presents the results of her profound research to the world. I am proud to be able to contribute this foreword to the book. No matter whether you are a scholar or someone curious about how dignity was experienced during the Arab Spring, this book will not disappoint. As the champion of karama that I know her to be, this book will likely lead the way to future explorations of the concept. Thank you, Zaynab, for your commitment to raising our consciousness about the one thing all of us want: *To experience the political, cultural, social and psychological conditions that promote and protect dignity so that we can all live together in peace and harmony.*

Donna Hicks

Acknowledgments

My research on dignity demands in the Global South goes back many years and culminated in my doctoral thesis. This important scholarly endeavor owed much to the support of my academic role models: Baudouin Dupret, Vincent Legrand, Charles Kurzman, Donna Hicks, Jeffrey T. Martin, Tawanda Sydesky Nyawasha, Abderrahim Agnaou and Bon C. Cheng. The idea of writing this book, with the same theme, goes back to about four years ago when I was encouraged by my mentors, friends and colleagues, Nizar Messari, Doris Gray and Jason Heffner at Al Akhawayn University, to take part in an exciting faculty exchange opportunity, which relieved me of my teaching duties in order to focus on research and writing. This faculty exchange opportunity was supported by the Department of Government and the Lewis Global Studies Center at Smith College, who hosted me and provided me with generous resources in Fall 2017. Gregory White, Janie Vanpée, Bozena Welborne, Elisabeth Armstrong, Vijay Prashad and Souleiman Mourad all contributed greatly to improve my thinking process and made my stay in Northampton, Massachusetts, an unforgettable experience.

I am very thankful to my editor Maria Marsh for enabling me to submit this book for publication and for accommodating my many requests during the final submission stage. I am also grateful for the very encouraging and constructive reviews of two anonymous manuscript reviewers and for the support of Atifa Jiwa, Natasha Whelan, Divya Arjunan and Beth Morel in getting the book ready for publication. My developmental editor, colleague and dear neighbor, Michelle Hansen, has also tremendously helped me improve my English writing. Thanks to Michelle, I got to know about Sara Bateman, my new developmental editor with whom I now share a

career path of moving from Al Akhawayn University to the International University of Rabat. My dear friend Joana Zuppas not only helped me with language editing, but also filled me with encouragement to carry on.

My current institution, the International University of Rabat, my department, Sciences Po Africa directed by Jean-Noël Ferrié, my college of Political, Social Sciences and Law led by Dean Abdellatif Bencherifa, our Vice President of Research and Development Abdelaziz Benjouad, along with my research center, the Center for Global Studies directed by Farid El Asri, have greatly supported me in the last mile to complete this book. I am also very lucky to be part of the Security in Context initiative led by the fantastic Omar Dahi to expand networks of research and pedagogy sharing on security issues through a North–South dialogue, which also supported me in completing the journey of this book.

Many parts of the third chapter in this book on dignity as a human right were published in chapter 11, “Human Dignity and Human Rights: Terms in Transition,” in the book *Human Dignity: Discourses, Practices, Transformations – Essays on Dignity Studies in Honor of Evelin G. Lindner*, edited by Chipamong Chowdhury, Michael Britton and Linda Hartling and honoring our dear friend Evelin Gerda Linder, a global scholar and transdisciplinary researcher who founded the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies network, a transdisciplinary global community dedicated to ending cycles of humiliation and cultivating dignity in all relationships. Evelin was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, 2016 and 2017 and the book was published in March 2020 by Dignity Press (Lake Oswego, OR). I am grateful for Chipamong and Michael for granting me permission to reuse parts of my chapter in this book and to Linda for giving the green light of Dignity Press as well.

Many other people have helped me tremendously in writing this book, and I would like to thank you.

I am indebted to Mohamed Bouazizi and to the people of the Arab world, and will always be to my parents, the authors of my life and the editors of my destiny, Fatima El Kabbaj and Azzouz El Bernoussi. I thank my siblings, Khalil and Myriame, for putting up with me. Last, I thank Bashir Saade.

Of course, all errors are mine.

A Note on Transliteration

This book uses transliteration of Arabic words into English. In some cases, Arabic script is also used to give a clearer idea to the reader (particularly the reader of the Arabic script) about the Arabic word that is precisely discussed.

The process of transliteration depends on the differences in orthography and phonology between the two languages, and because Modern Standard Arabic differs from Egyptian dialect, this process is made even more difficult. The transliteration style I use in this book is mostly consistent with the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, without the initial *hamza*. No diacritical marks are used in the body of the text (except in some bibliographical references). In terms of translations, I use my own or those from several dictionaries, in which case annotated footnotes are provided.

Commonly recognized words and proper nouns, including names of places, are transliterated in their most recognized form, for example, Cairo rather than *al-qaahirah*.

Glossary of Arabic Terms

- 'adala:** justice
dawla: state
fasad: corruption; immorality
hijab: head and chest scarf; veil for Muslim women
hogra: humiliation; oppression
hurriya: freedom; liberty
huwiyya: identity
i'tiraf: recognition
jihād: *internal struggle; holy war*
insaniyya: human; humane; humanitarian
karam: generosity; hospitality
karama: dignity; honor
masr: Egypt
muwatana: civism
nahda: renaissance; renewal
nafs: self; psyche
nizam: regime; system
qawmiyya: nationalism; pan-Arabism
qotriyya: solidarity; cooperation
salaf: ancestors; pious predecessors in early Islam
sharaf: honor

Introduction

But there are certain meanings that are lost forever the moment they are explained in words.

Haruki Murakami, 1Q84

How is your dignity today? Is it any of my business? Should your state protect it? Do you have it no matter what you do or does it depend on what you do? Is dignity something we should care about or is it nonsense? Are you feeling a headache? Well that has been my happy headache for quite some years now.

What is dignity? Well, I really don't know. OK Bye!

As you might expect, it is a struggle to define “dignity” because, like many terms, it has changed over time and it has a personal connotation to each of us, depending on our language. In English, “dignity” comes from the Latin word *dignitas*, which refers to a rank, whereas in Arabic, “dignity” (*karama*¹) shares a root with *karam*, or “generosity.” How to define dignity also depends on your personal experiences as a human being.

There are the dignity enthusiasts and the dignity skeptics, and I am a dignity enthusiast, as you will see, because I believe that dignity is a very useful concept to improve our relationships with one another – it's that simple. And to use the words of Judge Chrisitan Byk:

We need the notion of human dignity as a reminder that the perpetration of violence against others may create a negation not only of the humanity of others but of our own humanity.

(Düwell, Braarvig, Brownsword, and Mieth, eds., *Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*, 2014, p. 363)

¹ After this reference, *karama* is no longer italicized in the many references in the rest of the book.

When the Arab Spring started, I was living in New York City, right on Broadway in Morningside Heights, and hanging out with several members of expat Arab communities. It felt quite intense to be among them and share worries about our home countries. When the protests started in Morocco, I wanted to book the next flight back home and be close to my family, but my relatives and friends kept reassuring me that everything was all right and that the media were escalating the reality of the tensions and violence. As I was studying postcolonial theory, I could not help but look at the colonial legacy in our current regional struggles. I was particularly drawn to the need to use the politics of dignity, and this is how my research topic came about. This inquiry into the demands of dignity found fertile ground in me. Growing up in Morocco, I have been exposed to such calls and I have become sensitive to them because I have internalized the inexplicable emotional charge the term “dignity” sets off in myself and many people I have spoken to. The reasons for such demands in Morocco are numerous and complex but I think, like many of my compatriots, I have been particularly outraged by a lingering colonial haze despite the country’s independence. I chose to look at Egypt for this inquiry of demands of dignity for a number of reasons: my fascination with the history and culture of this country and also the layers of colonialism that have been imposed upon it.

In my attempt to make sense of my own inquiry, I intentionally refer specifically to dignity, not status, in order to clarify a common misinterpretation of dignity as an earned status. A dignity unrelated to status is a dignity that is inherent in everyone, regardless of who they are or even what they are. Though hard to grasp, such dignity might be what makes the kernel of the individual (Rosen 2012). Recognizing this dignity is more speculation for the time being, but this recognition is valuable because it allows for the overwhelming benefit of treating one another with dignity. This dignity that is not equivalent to status is the starting point for this book, but I came a long way to get here. What I looked for was how different people at particular times defined “their dignity,” “a dignity,” and “our dignity” when “dignity” itself was

lacking and needed to return. Anthropologist Sami Hermez proposes a thought-provoking description of dignity as a meaning-making tool, where meaning is drawn from both an individual and a collective sense of dignity (2011). People refer to dignity and try to attach a signifier to it, so I hear statements like, “the Nigerian police officers do not have any dignity,” when the meaning could be, “some Nigerian police officers have been convicted of bribery”; “Chinese academics do not have dignity,” when the meaning could be “Chinese academics suffer from censorship”; and “I do not want to act with dignity,” when the meaning could be “I do not want to act in a way that is likely to be validated by dominant moral constructs of behavior.” We must make a point to change this language because it spreads a mistaken understanding that dignity is negotiable when it is not. It is there and it must be asserted if it has been overlooked.

This book explores understandings of the concept of dignity, or in its Arabic translation as *karama*, in Egypt during the 2011 Arab Spring protests. In this context, it is important to remember the modern colonial legacies in Arab societies that are not only observable in these societies’ architecture and local languages but are also seen in their social and political transformations. In this book, the focus is on specific meanings (for *karama*) in a specific place (Egypt) at a specific time (the 2011 Arab Spring protests) to specific people (Egyptians) of a very general concept (*karama*/dignity).

“Arab Spring” here refers to the uprisings in response to street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi’s death in Tunisia. Bouazizi was a young man struggling to find a job to support his widowed mother and younger siblings from his meager revenues. After police officers in Sidi Bouzid confiscated, once again, his cart, on the claim that he did not have a permit, Bouazizi set himself on fire in an ultimate act of despair. His act was resounding in the context of the struggle of Tunisian youth to find legal means of income in addition to widespread government corruption.

The viral video of young Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz on the eve of the start of the January 25th revolution in Egypt could be

very likely the original inspiration for the use of the term “karama” in the context of the events of this study. Asmaa Mahfouz is a young Egyptian activist and one of the founders, in 2008, of the April 6th Movement. On January 18, 2011, Mahfouz posted on her Facebook page a video blog (vlog), which would later go viral on YouTube, in which she called for Egyptians to congregate in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011. It is important to note that this date, January 25, was symbolic as it corresponded to the National Police Day that commemorates the resistance of Egyptian police officers to British orders in 1952. Mahfouz was not the only one who called for demonstrations on this date (one of the characteristics of the protests was that they were leaderless), as other Egyptian social movements decided on this same date too.

The language of speech that Mahfouz made was often very emotional to precisely motivate the people. For instance, she used terms such *haram ‘alaykum* (roughly, “shame on you”) to stimulate feelings of guilt, and she also repeatedly used the term “karama” to tap into the need to have one’s dignity recognized. Given the patriarchal nature of Egyptian society, it is important to remember that Asmaa, a young female activist, carefully operated within this context; indeed, in her video she called male participants to join her, which suggested the necessity of male participation to legitimize the significance of the protests (Tschirgi, Kazziha and McMahon, 2013, p. 41).

Mahfouz was briefly imprisoned in 2008 and became a symbol of resilience, as well as resistance to the Mubarak government. With her January 18, 2011, viral video, Mahfouz became one of the symbols of the 2011 Arab Spring in Egypt. Israa Abdel Fatah,² another young Egyptian activist woman, co-founded with Mahfouz the April 6 Movement and also became a major figure in the 2011 revolution.

² Also, in a similar fashion to Mahfouz, Abdel Fattah posted on her Facebook a statement claiming karama at the eve of the protests of April 6, 2008.

She was called the “Facebook Girl” and was known for her Internet activism and later reporting on the 2011 revolution to Al Jazeera.

Another important group of activists in the Arab Spring is the *Mosireen* (Arabic for “we are determined”), which emerged as a non-profit media activist collective that counts as members a number of renowned actors and actresses who work to continue the 2011 revolution gains of civil activism. It organized screenings in Tahrir Square of movies and documentaries that deal with social issues or that portray experiences from the Arab Spring revolutions. In Morocco, a similar collective emerged: *Mamfakinch* (Moroccan Arabic for “we do not let go”). These two groups exemplify that the claims that emerged in the Arab Spring have not been fully addressed, as there are groups that have continued to answer the calls for the different revolutionary demands. *Mosireen* still exists as an organization, but *Mamfakinch* was closed down by the summer of 2012.³

The different forms of street art that flourished during the 2011 revolution in Egypt can be seen as another form of artistic activism. Among the many artists who used the streets as their canvas, Bahia Shehab presented a peculiar story. In the book *Walls of Freedom* (Hamdy et al., 2013), Shehab recounted the story of her experiences in the streets of Cairo using her stencils of the Arabic word *la* (which means “no”) to add graffiti to various buildings. She said that some of her experiences were very positive, as people would encourage her and support her, but other experiences were very negative, as others would ridicule her work. What is interesting, though, is that Shehab stated that the artistic use of the word “no” in Arabic was a way to express negation of humiliation, which was a way to express *karama*.⁴

³ *Mosireen* continues its activities for the principles of the revolution laid down in its official webpage (mosireen.org). The page also lists the calendar of events for public screenings. Conversely, Hisham Almiraat explains the experience of the closing down of *Mamfakinch* to Amnesty on December 9, 2016. www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2016/12/how-a-hacking-campaign-helped-shut-down-an-award-winning-news-site/.

⁴ Dr. Bahia Shehab was interviewed on Skype for this study on March 26, 2015, and has agreed to be cited in this book.

In tracing the genealogy of *karama* in the 2011 events in Egypt, it is important to look at different social networks such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. The substantial fieldwork of Enrique Klaus on graffiti in the Arab Spring in Egypt showed that the graffiti was not only a genuine artistic urban expression, but also an opportunity to use global art as a media tool (2014). Indeed, and with our understanding of *karama* as a global call to action, the art of the Arab Spring was much documented through news channels and through open social media. It might not be very relevant to this study to count the number of occurrences of the term “*karama*” on Twitter, for instance, as other terms with less symbolism such as “spring” can occur just as often or even more often. However, when looking at these numerous social networks, the repetition of the terms “dignity” and “*karama*” highlights their importance to the Arab Spring movement.

The period of the Arab Spring began December 18, 2010, which marked the beginning of the Tunisian revolution following Bouazizi’s self-immolation the day before. Technically, the Arab Spring is still ongoing, with the continuing power struggle and violence in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, bringing to the fore the Sunni–Shiite struggle, geopolitical fights, the battle between different Salafists and more religiously moderate Muslims, as well as a long string of other types of conflicts in the region.

It is unclear when the use of the term “Arab Spring” was coined.⁵ However, there are multiple other terms used to refer to these events, such as the Arab Uprisings or the Arab Awakening. Tunisia is the only Arab country where activists and scholars insist on the specific title “The Revolution of Dignity/*Karama*,” as opposed to the Western-generated terminology of the “Jasmine Revolution,” “The Facebook revolution,” or the “Arab Spring.” The denunciation

⁵ Some sources speculate that the U.S.-based magazine *Foreign Policy* was the first to use the term “Arab Spring” (here is a link to an article about this claim by political scientist Joseph Massad: www.al-akhbar.com/node/166078); others speculate that it originated with Tunisian journalist and 2014 Tunisian presidential election candidate, Safi Saïd: <http://machahid24.com/grand-maghreb/22029.html>.

of such terms translates into a desire to reject a commodification of life that came with market liberalization, and which mostly served an industry of mass tourism benefiting foreigners at the expense of locals' welfare (Mansar, 2011; Omri, 2012). The term "spring" is, in general, a reference to the natural process of blossoming and has been used in political events such as the revolutions of 1848 – a series of political upheavals throughout Western and Central Europe referred to as the "Spring of Nations." Other worthy references of the term "spring" in this context are the "Prague Spring," a period of demands for political liberalization in Czechoslovakia starting in 1968,⁶ and the "Beijing Spring," which similarly witnessed demands for political liberalization in 1978.⁷ Despite the fact that "Arab Spring" is the most widely used term, it carries a Western connotation that stirs a debate over an enduring Orientalist gaze on the postcolonial world. Therefore, from now on, and in keeping with the book's title, I will be referring to the Arab Uprisings.⁸

The "Arab" component of the Arab Uprisings highlights the importance of expressing the Arab identity of the protesters, but there was also the uncontested background of globalization. The increasing influence of external events in specific localities is also facilitated in the context of globalization, with opening borders for international trade, exchanging knowledge and cooperating for world peace. Globalization has also boosted a continuous process of hybridization, leading to multicultural identities, meaning forms of self-identification with traits specific to several identified groups. Moreover, globalization has contributed to increasing transnational

⁶ For more on the Prague Spring: Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁷ For more on the Beijing Spring: Craig Calhoun, "Tiananmen, Television and the Public Sphere: Internationalization of Culture and the Beijing Spring of 1989," *Public Culture* 2, no. 1 (1989): 54–71.

⁸ I also explain the importance of using the term "uprisings" to make a more coherent relationship between the 2011 events in the Arab world with the 1987 Palestinian *intifada* in the opinion piece I published for *E-International Relations*, on February 4, 2021: www.e-ir.info/2021/02/04/opinion-the-arab-uprisings-ten-years-on/.

identities (Scholte, 2005). Arab identity is one example of a trans-national identity and has been a particularly central concern due to the events of the Arab Uprisings, which has enforced a feeling of shared community among Arab societies. This identity is also linked to the demands for *karama* due to the similarities between Arab regimes in these societies. For instance, images of protesters brandishing flags of other Arab societies were often seen in the media, which indicated empathy among Arab people. This empathy is the result of a unity that is shared, most importantly, in the Arabic language and the familiarity of surroundings if one travels throughout the different Arab countries.

The 2011 Egyptian uprisings toppled the Mubarak regime in the context of the Arab Uprisings outbreaks and the broader push for democracy and human rights in the region of North Africa and the Middle East. Dignity discourse – the focus on a language of dignity to stimulate politicization of dignity and recognition – was used in this event. The language of the uprisings particularly focused on dignity rhetoric that was quickly picked up by the protesters who recognized its sociocultural meanings from their experience of contemporary Egyptian culture. Speaking about dignity is primordial in many cultures, but given the feeling that people were robbed of their dignity in the corrupt and authoritarian Mubarak regime made this rhetoric even more resounding in Egypt. In the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the protesters demanded dignity for the political project of ousting Mubarak.

This book's period of interest begins with the protests on January 25, 2011, or the 2011 Egyptian revolution,⁹ which ultimately

⁹ I mostly refer to the events as the 2011 Arab Uprisings in Egypt, and not the more common reference to the 2011 revolution in Egypt, due to the incomplete nature of the revolutionary process in this specific case. A revolution entails a fundamental change of a particular sociopolitical regime, whereas the revolutionary process to change the political regime in Egypt was halted with the return of a military-backed regime of President Abdel Fattah El Sisi. However, it is important to note that despite these facts, many people consider the events a revolution because of the magnitude of the protests, the significant number of people who died for the revolutionary cause

led to the resignation of former president Hosni Mubarak. Egypt's army no longer fully supported Mubarak's rule, and even wanted his ousting, which created an opportunity for the army to instrumentalize the anti-Mubarak protests and gain popular support (Barany, 2011). After dismantling the Mubarak regime and devising a brand-new electoral structure in the country, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi became the first democratically elected president of Egypt. Several controversies marked the short history of Morsi's Egypt, and a notable one is the Sinai Affair, in which Islamists were condemned for targeting not only Israelis in the Sinai, but also Egyptians. This affair proved that the Muslim Brotherhood were planning on keeping control of the country and served as an opportunity for the military regime to return and increase the crackdown on those Islamist groups, particularly the jihadist ones. Some opposition groups used the Sinai Affair in their critiques of the Muslim Brotherhood government. More importantly, there was a string of political faux pas made by the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly the presidential decree to immunize the Constituent Assembly and the Shura Council from dissolution by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which led the Brethren to move from ruling to opposition party (Kasanwidjojo, 2017).

Since Morsi's removal, levels of repression are even higher than they were before 2011.¹⁰ There have been over 60,000 political dissidents detained since 2013 and the rise of President El Sisi.¹¹ In Egypt's chapter of the Arab Barometer's report, "Five Years after the Uprisings" (2017), 85 percent of Egyptians expressed trust for the armed forces, while most respondents still believed democracy to be preferable to any other system, which should give hope to

and the successful outcome of ousting Hosni Mubarak, which are considerable outcomes.

¹⁰ Daniel Tavana, "Egypt Five Years after the Uprisings: Findings from the Arab Barometer," *Egypt Wave 4 Country Report*, July 20, 2017.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, *World Report*, Egypt Country Chapter, 2017.

pro-democracy activists repressed by the regime.¹² The report also showed that trust in elections in 2016 was higher compared to 2011. Over half (51 percent) of Egyptians said the influence of the United States has been somewhat or very negative. Roughly a third (29 percent) of Egyptians believed people are generally trustworthy, which is quite low when compared to levels of trust in Northern democratic contexts. Three-quarters (77 percent) of Egyptians claimed politics were too complicated to understand, and 64 percent of Egyptians did not use the internet. Many respondents in the report saw that the rigidity in Arab authoritarianism created an unbearable feeling of injustice and powerlessness. The more recent Arab Barometer's Egypt report (2019) didn't show any substantial change from that of 2017, except for a greater focus on the economy, which is predictable given that the International Monetary Fund's Extended Facility Fund, inaugurated in November 2016, provided an aid package of US\$12 billion. In his captivating book, *The Egyptians*, journalist Jack Shenker recounted with laser-sharp focus the many stories of injustice and powerlessness from his experiences in Egypt, such as the random jailing of the Egyptian blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah (2016, pp. 273), but also stressed how these stories relate to economic market exploitation from both inside and outside the country. Shenker even started his book with the numerous cases of terrible prosecution still committed in Egypt after the 2011 revolution. Shenker most importantly unveils the impressively resilient spirit of the Egyptian people, for instance, the schoolchildren of Zawyet el Dahshour who kept reenacting the revolution despite opposition to such behavior. They became even more courageous in denouncing abuses. Johnny West, another notable journalist, in his book *Karama!* similarly recounted a spirit of resilience in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings revolution in Tunisia, as young pupils were more likely now to resist their

¹² Robert F. Worth, "Lawless Sinai Shows Risks Rising in Fractured Egypt," *New York Times*, August 10, 2013; www.nytimes.com/2013/08/11/world/middleeast/lawless-sinai-shows-risks-rising-in-fractured-egypt.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0;p.

professors (2011). For West, *karama* became the word that Tunisian people used to summarize the many reasons for their own struggles. West also tells the story of how “normal” Tunisians became revolutionaries. As a Westerner brought up in a more democratic and human rights-friendly environment, West also recounts how he started to see things from the Tunisians’ points of view. For instance, he previously favored the revolution and ousting of the authoritarian regime, but as he experienced the outbreak of violence and instability that followed the revolution, West also started to understand why some people may prefer to keep the status quo. One poignant story he tells is that of picking up hitchhikers in the early post-revolution days in Tunisia and going through a state police checkpoint, where he felt resentment. Then he went through a militia checkpoint, where he felt a fear of anarchy. There, he empathized with Arab women and men who are faced with the difficulty of choosing between the status quo and the revolution.

Very few Egyptians are active in civil society, as only 3 percent of them reported having attended a meeting to discuss a subject or sign a petition in the past three years. Nineteen percent believed that for people like themselves, it does not matter what kind of government they have. However, as Egyptian historian Khaled Fahmy notes, politics is not only government issues or academic jargon.¹³ Now, politics is everywhere in Egypt because of the revolution – in coffee-houses, at hairdressers, in pillow talk. The genie is out of the bottle, and it cannot be pushed back in.

ARGUMENT AND CONTRIBUTION

This book is intended for students and inquirers of the 2011 uprisings that shook the Arab world. Here, readers will find a study of the political instrumentalization of the demand of dignity during the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The object of this book is dual: it is about

¹³ Fahmy, “The Long revolution,” blog post, November 3, 2015, <https://khaledfahmy.org/en/2015/11/03/the-long-revolution/>.

what actors said about karama/dignity in 2011 (which is better represented by art expressions and photographs created at the time of the events), and it is about the memory of what actors thought of karama two to four years after the 2011 Arab Uprisings. The object of the memory is also multiple: it is related to (1) remembering karama and Nasser in 1956 (as a moment of high symbolism of Arabism), (2) remembering karama and Nasser in 2011 and (3) remembering karama and Nasser memorialized in 2011 two to four years after the Arab Uprisings in Egypt. For these multiple objects of inquiry in the book, empirical data ranging from interviews to art analysis were used.

The aim here is not to define karama, but rather to show the performance of the karama signifier. Consistent with Jacques Derrida's work on semiotics (1978), the relationship between signifier and signified was not fixed, as the signifier indicated many signified in a dynamic fashion. The main task in the interviews was to ask the participants about karama and then assess their feedback. These responses varied depending on mood and on memory. For instance, some participants' discourse on karama appeared spontaneous, whereas others' definitions appeared more self-reflective. Indeed, people often carry on with their daily activities without much self-reflection until they are precisely asked to do so. For instance, judges in Egypt would carry on with their professional activities often without much reflecting on their own condition, but if they were asked about their own thoughts on their condition, as with the case of an interview, they would then reflect on it (Dupret, 2003). In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that interviews provide a "second-hand" reality, meaning that interviewees describe the reality of their thinking about a previous reality. They reflect on a reality that they are re-imagining, and it does not necessarily correspond to the lived reality they are reflecting upon. The exercise of responding to an interview is then not only a memory reconstruction, but also a form of cognitive rationalization in which the interviewee (who is responding) engages in a dual activity of justification to herself and to the interviewer (Legrand, 2009, pp. 99–105).

This book engages with the concept of dignity beyond noncontextual structures of meanings – that is, meanings that are dictated by a global view of the concept of dignity based on universality of human rights, and that sees dignity as a human right, to reify the abstract form of this concept. For this engagement, it is important to specify and unravel the meanings of dignity that are shaped by specific cultural and historical perspectives. Structures of meanings change over time and space, and critical theories – such as postcolonial theory – invite us to take a closer look at the particular historical processes that shape societies. The cultural nature of such studies (related to the belief systems, shared knowledge and historical experiences of a group of people) focuses research on investigating the dynamics of vernacular modernity (i.e., a progressive sociocultural project appropriated by local societies) to see how these societies adopted or rejected a model of progress brought from Europe in the period of European colonization starting in the nineteenth century. I believe that such empirical studies of local political dynamics after independence from foreign occupation – in the sense that these studies are based on observing the experience of local societies when exposed to foreign influence – can make a significant contribution to deepening our understanding of classical theoretical debates that are a matter of societal concern. The first of these debates involves our ability as humans to live peacefully with each other in a society, since a claim of “victimhood” in fighting for dignity can lead to violent struggles (Lyon, 1963). A second debate concerns the quest for power in the sense that a demand for dignity can be associated with a demand for recognition and empowerment, particularly when a marginalized group accesses power in the name of reacquiring an assaulted dignity (Taylor, 1997; Diani, 2014).

The *telos* of this book is to capture different understandings of the concept of *karama* in the 2011 revolution in order to precisely refute the argument that there could be a universal understanding of this concept. Here are the main arguments: (1) there are multiple understandings of *karama*, which rejects statements attempting to present an “Egyptian understanding of *karama*/dignity,” or a

"Western understanding of karama/dignity," and more importantly a "Universal understanding of karama/dignity"; (2) the vague, and oftentimes nonexistent, explanations for dignity in constitutions, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and other legal texts (including corporate bylaws) facilitate the politicization of dignity claims to serve particular interest groups; (3) the variety of issues attached to claims of dignity give an insight into structural problems (those stemming from a global view) of a capitalist order (widening gap between the rich, the middle class and the poor), on the interference of religion and politics (karama as faith) and on issues of social and political development. Different matters and agendas can bring several political movements to intermingle in a form of "solidarity without consensus" and strengthen the momentum of a political opposition (Kertzer, 1988). To a certain extent, this intermingling was seen in the case of the Arab Uprisings and could be related to a lack of coherence of interests among these political opposition groups.

Moreover, this research explores semantics and pragmatics of the very general concept of dignity that has an international and global appeal to serve very specific demands. This is important in understanding issues of international relations, and particularly of international development, as dignity has become a focal point. For instance, development economist Amartya Sen's (1999) notable use of terms such as "freedom" and "dignity" imply that these are universal values, which can be considered an assault on individual understandings. If we consider dignity as the worth of *all* individuals, and freedom as the empowerment of *all* individuals, then those senses of dignity and freedom are interfering with understandings of dignity as the worth of *one* group over another, and freedom as the empowerment of *one* group over another. The reality is that (as seen with the interviews) individuals simply cannot speak for the entire human population, but they attempt to do so by talking about a group they pertain to or even about merely themselves. For better or worse, the context of globalization augments the tendency to speak for others and particularly for the global community, *making the personal*

international, to use feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe's resounding words (2014). I do not propose an alternative of recognizing all understandings of general concepts such as dignity and freedom. However, this book attempts to challenge such generalizations and present the individual voices of people often included within these generalizations (e.g. "the Arab understanding" or "the Egyptian understanding"). The point here is to understand that an expression of what dignity is comes from the respondent's position. In the case of *karama*, the definitions given by the individuals interviewed predominantly stress dignity's nature as a core human value. However, its meaning can range from the normality of life (eating and working) to more grand claims (representation in government, reform of legislation to protect human rights and international recognition of sovereignty). This shows that *karama* is a multifaceted word, not necessarily linked to material things, which unveils various epistemological frameworks.

The empirical focus in this book is Egypt during the 2011 Arab Uprisings and particularly the actions and memories of actors in these events. In this context, the use of the concept of dignity benefited from a context of feelings of humiliation, backwardness and a sense of helplessness spread among the local population since the Free Officers' revolution in 1952 that kicked out the Muhammad Ali dynasty of Albanian origin (Hopwood, 1993; and Osman, 2010). The increasing number of Egyptians living in poverty also exacerbated this negative mood. Yet, populations all over the Global South have also felt helplessness, but they seem to be approaching overcoming poverty in different ways. Evidently, it does not make sense to blame poverty alone for protests and revolutions in the same way that it does not make sense to say that only the poorest people in the Egyptian society triggered the 2011 uprisings. Indeed, the Egyptian revolution in 2011 witnessed the participation of people from different socio-economic backgrounds, but with relatively few people from very poor backgrounds. Indeed, some of these people were illiterates, intellectuals, Muslims, Christians, Marxists and liberals, to name a few

(Korotayev and Zinkina, 2011). The demands in the protests were also just as diverse: food (bread), dignity, social justice, freedom, democracy, anarchy, right to marriage and free internet, to name a few. Therefore, the historical moment of the 2011 Arab Uprisings offers a great opportunity to observe dignity claims in Egypt. Moreover, these 2011 Arab Uprisings in Egypt have been studied around issues of democratization and political development without much focus on dignity as expressed by protesters. Much scholarship on dignity/karama in Arabic, English and French (Hessel, 2010; Cook, 2011; Mansar, 2011; Omri, 2012; Pearlman, 2013; Diani, 2014) deals with the concept as an indicator of layers of social issues, but this book's particular contribution is to look at the understandings of karama from the standpoint of particular protesters at a particular time.

This book is for readers who have an interest in understanding the political instrumentalization of the concept of human dignity in contemporary societies. The book provides the example of the 2011 revolution in Egypt in the context of the Arab uprisings in which there were demands of dignity by protesters and stands out from other studies on the concept of dignity as it highlights lived experiences of protesters and demanders of dignity and a link between dignity politics and identity politics. The book also targets a wide audience of readers interested in understanding the politics and societies of the Arab world. I use the term "Arab" beyond an ethnic/linguistic characterization, but as a renewed identification in the region of the Middle East and North Africa that has reversed the top-down layout of the Pan-Arab project (led by the State) to one led by the *Midan*, or the protest square (Bilgin, 2015). This book is also for students of political science, Middle East and North Africa studies, protest movements and postcolonial international studies. There is also a growing field of dignity and humiliation studies of which this book is a part.

In studying contemporary societies, the concept of dignity has been approached in various ways. For instance, in studying the

modern history of Egypt, the use of the concept of dignity seems to parallel, oftentimes, a context of feelings of humiliation and backwardness and a sense of helplessness spread among the local population, since the Free Officers' revolution in 1952 that kicked out the Muhammad Ali dynasty of Albanian origin; this negative mood was also exacerbated by the increasing number of Egyptians in poverty and precarity (Hopwood, 1993; Osman, 2010; Cook, 2011). In sociology, the early work of Barrington Moore on the importance of the bourgeoisie class in triggering revolutions showed how such protests and demands carry an instrumentalization of the concept of dignity to bring in the masses (1978). Asef Bayat added to Moore's findings by highlighting the mechanics of dignity politics as they trigger a "moral outrage," much needed in times of a revolution (2009). There is also the recent collaborative work of Michèle Lamont on the recognition gap that is useful to provide evidence that marginalization and particularly perceptions of violations of dignity are damaging to social integration and could be tackled via inclusive policies (2018).¹⁴ In development studies, Martha Nussbaum's work (2009, 2018) on building capabilities and nonmaterial dimensions of well-being stressed the dimension of dignity, along with the work of Pheng Cheah (2006), who showed an incompatibility between global capitalist contexts and a genuine expansion of a society of human rights that leaves behind dignity issues. In political studies, David Kertzer's work on how different political demands and agendas can bring several political movements to intermingle in a form of "solidarity without consensus" and strengthen the momentum of a political opposition focused on catchall slogans and dignity is one of them (1988, p. 29). Also, George Kateb presented the importance of human dignity in strengthening the political claim of human rights and achieving better

¹⁴ Michèle Lamont's book, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Harvard University Press, 2009), is also an insightful study of working men in France and the United States and how perceptions of lack of dignity have impacted their social integration in their respective contexts.

democratic development of political systems (2011). Sami Zemni (2013), who wrote about the Arab Uprisings, brought an important insight into the need for what he calls a moral economy, in the context of predatory practices in business and even in public administration that one finds in many Arab countries and that leads to those demands of *karama*. In psychology, the groundbreaking work of Donna Hicks (2011, 2018), as a conflict-resolution expert, exhibited the damaging power of dignity wounds, particularly when dignity is not honored. She supports her important claim by showing that assaulting dignity triggers the same parts of one's brain than those stimulated by physical pain. In postcolonial studies, Partha Chatterjee's work on the appropriation of so-called universalist and modern concepts such as contemporary democracy in the postcolonial world is really useful to understand how the concept of dignity can also reappropriated. For Chatterjee, postcolonial democracy becomes a form of survival bargaining with the state, in which the most marginalized/poorest can exert a moral pressure on the state – and that is very relevant to the case of Egypt and the political instrumentalization of dignity (2011). Overall, then, in addition to the role of dignity as an unfulfilled quest in the postcolonial context of repression and humiliation, we see that it is also legitimizing protests and both roles were useful to the protesters. Unlike the previously listed works, my research on demands of dignity in Egypt was triggered by noticing a recurrent demand for dignity in postcolonial Egypt that goes back to Nasser's era and that keeps on swelling up not only there but in several parts of the world.

TERMINOLOGY

*Karama*¹⁵ (كرامة) is an Arabic word that usually translates to “dignity” in English. *Karama* harbors a concept with multiple and intricate

¹⁵ A more correct transcription would be *karaama* because a lengthened vowel in Arabic is semantically significant. However, the word is commonly transcribed as “*karama*” (for instance, *Karama* is the name of an Egyptian newspaper, a human rights organization and a neighborhood in Dubai), which is why I chose to use it.

meanings and, similarly to dignity, it is defined very differently from one person to another. With Arabic being a Semitic language, the etymology of the term “karama” shows that it shares its trilateral consonantal root, which is *ka-ro-ma* (كرم), with the word *karam* (كرم), meaning “generosity.” Both *karama* and *karam* are transformed into a multitude of words with transfixes added to their common trilateral consonantal root, for example, *karam* → *kareem* (generous) and *karama* → *mukarram* (“dignified”). The word “karama” itself has an array of meanings, such as dignity, honor, respect, miracle and even lid.¹⁶ In Egyptian dialect, the word for “dignity” is also *karama*, so there is no other specific translation.¹⁷ Using “karama” instead of “dignity” helps to emphasize the specific linguistic and cultural context of this study on narratives of dignity in the Arab Uprisings context.

The focus of this book is *not* to explore the etymology of the word “karama,” but to see how the use of this word in a specific context can help in understanding how knowledge is constructed and how political dynamics operate in a specific society (Hermez, 2011; Mehrez, 2012; Baker, 2015). *Karama* was used as one of main slogans of the January 25th revolution of the Arab Uprisings wave, along with the words “bread,” “freedom” and “social justice.” *Karama* was used in these slogans for its aggregating function, meaning that it relates to most other demands, such as human rights or access to employment, and thus includes them as well. *Karama* is also about the worth of individuals and is often what distinguishes humanity itself. In a sense, *karama* could be the core of existence. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that concepts such as *karama* keep changing over time.

This book exposes some of the meanings that people have attached to the word “karama” in relation to the 2011 Arab

¹⁶ *Qamoos Almaany*, 2015 – online: Almaany.com; Ibn Mazur, *Lisaan Al Arab*, 3rd ed. (Dar Sader, 2000; and J. M. Cowan, *Arabic-English Dictionary: A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (O. Harrassowitz, 1976).

¹⁷ *Lisaan Masry*, 2015 – online: lisaanmasry.org.

Uprisings in Egypt. The word is looked at as one of the demands that emerged in the Arab Uprisings and, in this case, the 2011 Uprisings in Egypt. The goal is not to justify that *karama*/dignity was one of the main popular demands in the Arab Uprisings because this would make a substantive research project in itself. In addition to *karama*/dignity, many other claims were also uttered during the Arab Uprisings events, such as democracy (and more in the sense of accountability and suspension of the state of emergency laws as explained by some interviewees), justice and freedom. These words also represent important claims worth analyzing and also have several meanings. However, this book concentrates only on the word *karama*/dignity in order to stay focused and reach a relative depth of analysis. The choice of the term is also due to a slight increase in the use of the English translation, "dignity," in news headlines around the world based on frequency searches compounded by Google Trends. The word "dignity" showed a slight trend of increase of interest over time from 2007 to 2017. There appears to be two clear breakouts for searches of the phrases "dignity meaning" and "what is dignity" around the time of the revolution. Google Trends defines a breakout when the rise in the searches is 500 percent or more over a specific time period. More than 100,000 tweets about dignity are found on Twitter in the time period of the revolutionary uprisings (from January 25 to February 11, 2011). When looking at the Arabic words for Arabic translation of the concepts of dignity (كرامة / *karama*), democracy (ديمقراطية / *dimuqratiya*), freedom (حرية / *huriya*) and social justice (عدالة اجتماعية / *'adala ijtima'iyya*) in Egypt, most of the terms show a sharp increase in use in 2011. When compiling tweets to create word clouds, dignity was a significantly used term both in English and Arabic when reporting on the revolution.

LAYERS OF MEANING

To understand layers of meaning for dignity/*karama*, the goal here was to interview different types of people who participated in the 2011 uprisings in Egypt (based on a snowball method) and analyze

how different symbols and human expressions (such as banners, videos, art, images, music, plays and films) were used to convey various views about karama. The human expressions consist of outlets, such as cinema, literature, street art, music, vlogs, tweets and, of course, protest banners. These outlets were chosen because they conveyed the claim of karama in relation to the Arab Uprisings in Egypt, and further include forms of artistic representation in which the concept of karama was used. While both interviews and analyses of human expressions were empirical data for the book, it is important to remember that not all the data are of the same nature and of the same value in understanding the objectives of this book. For instance, on the one hand, the photographic data on the protests in 2011 come first in helping to grasp the way karama was used during the actual events. Interviews conducted later, on the other hand, are reconstructions and, arguably, re-imaginings of the past moment. However, the value of interviews is different as they bring in the very unique voices of actors in the events and their own reflections. These reconstructions represent rich narratives, showing the centrality of those involved in creating meaning while also attempting to convince me to buy into their story and their interpretations of the events and of karama. Moreover, to flesh out these references from the interviews, some obscured details about the backgrounds of the interviewees are added, without transgressing the anonymity of the respondent to protect their privacy. The empirical data also encompass human expressions that represent multiple artistic forms, from literature to music. The analysis of these art forms, along with photographs, helps in grasping the socioeconomic reality of Egypt in 2011.

I interviewed thirty Egyptians about their involvement in the 2011 Arab Uprisings protests in Egypt: twenty men and ten women. There was no attempt to have a gender balance or represent the gender distribution of protesters. Rather, my attempt here was to find people who appeared to be more comfortable in talking to me. My first tactic was to look for any shared contacts, and then I shared my own positions on the importance of talking about the protests and the

concept of dignity. I discerned the prospective interviewees' comfort with me if they were enthusiastic as a result of my two attempts to engage in further talks. Among them, I have encountered both sympathizers with the theme of Nasserism¹⁸ and Arab identity as well as opponents of this theme. The interviews were conducted at least twice, and sometimes even four times, with the same respondent (depending on availability) to unveil how one person might present very different understandings of dignity. This way of repeating the interviews entailed developing relationships with the respondents and prioritizing "quality" over "quantity" of interviews. These interviews were more of a compassionate conversation rather than a quest for answers. First, it was important to get to know the interviewee and then ask general questions about the motives behind their involvement in the protests. I tried first to see if *karama* could be brought up spontaneously by the person being interviewed. If not, I would bring the subject into the discussion. The same goes for the themes selected for this study.

THE WIDER CONTEXT FOR DIGNITY SLOGANS

The concept of dignity has become, again, an important focal point for sociocultural and political issues, warranting much attention in different fields of study and particularly in the field of international politics (Quataert, 2009). In the past, calls for dignity were associated with socially deprived groups, such as African American communities during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. More recently, calls for dignity have emerged, but this time from financially unsatisfied groups, such as the "Occupy" movements and "Yellow Vests" in Europe; from racially targeted groups, like "Black Lives Matter"; from politically and socially repressed groups, such as the protesters in the Arab Uprisings; or even from various types of

¹⁸ Nasser's Arab nationalist and socialist political ideology in the 1950s and 1960s that aimed to target a group of subproletariat, mostly Muslim urban poor, to mobilize them, beyond a clientelist system (see Asad and Owen, 1983).

COVID-19 victims. These calls motivate this book as it seeks to focus on the cultural and historical conditions for such demands.

It is also important to remember that even though the Arab Uprisings was widely supported by the people in the region, there was – and still is – opposition to the regime changes. A special issue of the journal *American Ethnologist* focusing on the 2011 Egyptian revolution (volume 39, 2012) presented some of the contesting positions regarding the revolution. Some showed enthusiasm toward the uprisings and called for “engaged” scholarship. Others took a step back and called for reflecting on the events first. Indeed, stepping back and reflecting on the Arab Uprisings could enable a “relative autonomy” that may support more useful analyses aiming at understanding the complexities of the events.

In addition, the urgency in the calls for *karama*, for instance, pushes one to ask whether this urgency comes from an engaged, “commandist”¹⁹ and hurried action, rather than a well-thought-out, consensual and timely action. In said issue of the *American Ethnologist*, the discussion also brought up the debates around the religious, the secular and the modern (Hirschkind, 2012). Cultural anthropologist Talal Asad’s work, in this respect, prompts thinking about the dilemma between an inclusive democratic sensibility, such as the care for freedom of expression, and an exclusive group subjectivity, such as the care for formal religious institutions (1996, 2003). It is also important to keep in mind the importance of intersubjectivity, as individuals should not be considered as atoms free from the influence of social events (Hasso and Salime, 2016).

STRUCTURE AND THEMATIC CHAPTERS

Preliminary rounds of interviews showed that there were four main themes people would associate with *karama*: (1) human rights; (2) materialism/money; (3) crisis of “Arabness” or “Arabitude,” as

¹⁹ Using Arend Lijphart’s coined term referring to “commandist” methods used by some African authoritarian regimes.

philosopher Hélène Cixous would say, which is linked to Egyptian nationality/former president Gamal Abdel Nasser; and (4) religion. These categories often came spontaneously from the interviewees, except for the theme of Nasser. I often brought up Nasser myself as part of the discussions due to my previous research on Nasser's personification of national dignity and due to the use of images of Nasser in the 2011 Arab Uprisings. The thematic approach to the study of dignity in this book reflects a process of selection based on those preliminary rounds of interviews. Though there are other important themes relating to dignity/karama, it was important in this study to focus on those themes that were mostly repeated by the protesters. There are also significant overlaps between the themes that are signaled throughout the chapters and these themes are used in the chapters of the book.

My previous study on the concept of dignity reflected on Nasser's portrayal of nationalist/pan-Arab/Third Worldist discourse, and it inspired this book wherein I continue to look at the Egyptian case, but with the more recent case of the 2011 Arab Uprisings and the memories of those events years later. Here are the main questions: What were some meanings of karama in the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, and how can they inform our understandings of such a concept? Another important question to ask is, What can be learned from the politics of dignity (in this case, from the Egyptian society during the 2011 Arab Uprisings) that could help with understanding social, political and developmental issues in this society and, to some extent, in societies where similar struggles are seen? This is not to say that the study aims to make generalizations. However, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of social and political studies is to construct meaning for specific cases and move forward from there (with a hypothetical base) to attempt understanding other cases.

The hope with this book is to further highlight the centrality of the karama discourse in the Arab Uprisings protests. Interestingly, karama claims were stemming from a feeling of humiliation that is often related to financial constraints, which were further investigated in the thematic chapter on karama as materialism.

In the development of this book, the following chapters define categories of defining *karama* that emerged from interviews and archival research (with quotes from interviews):

Chapter 1: *Karama* as a human right: "Of course, *karama* is a human right."

Chapter 2: *Karama* as materiality: "Money buys *karama*." "The Muslim Brotherhood people do not understand real *karama*." (Here it assumed that there is a preconceived form of *karama*.)

Chapter 3: *Karama* as religious piety: "*Karama* is a gift from Islam."

Chapter 4: *Karama* as nationality and particularly as an Arab problem: "We the Arab people do not have *karama*, I am telling you."

Each chapter presents the importance of the selected theme to *karama*/dignity in understanding Egypt and postcolonial societies. The chapters also contain a section reflecting on the interviews with the participants in the 2011 Arab Uprisings protests in Egypt, with names changed to keep respondents' anonymity. The last chapter presents an important finding in this study about the traumatic experience of understanding dignity/*karama* as one's identity and the resulting vulnerability that can confront individuals from such experience. A preliminary scholarly investigation of dignity/*karama* has led me to approach the word as a multivalent concept that takes on circumstantial definitions. For this reason, dignity can be dangerously empowering: it uses morality to favor tolerance of others, yet it can promote engagement in unethical behavior that works to oppress any opposition. I call this process "dignition" and "*i'tikram*" in Arabic, a portmanteau between dignity (*karama*) and recognition (*i'tiraf*), and suggest that this particular invocation of dignity is stemming from the modern colonial experience and the ensuing culture of violence.²⁰ Dignition should not be confused with the word "dignation," which means showing consideration and esteem to someone to

²⁰ The works of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral and Thomas Sankara, among others, represent this thread of a struggle with dignity due to the legacy of the colonial experience not only in the new state institutions but, most importantly, in people's minds. I explore this point more in depth in the last chapter.

raise their status. The term "dignation" has fallen out of use. The last chapter deals with this suggested concept of dignition, with a suggestive proposal of a peculiar need for dignity recognition rather than a definitive one because it is my intent as a scholar striving for critical analysis.

I Dignity as Faith

For the theme of dignity as faith, it is important, first, to clarify the use of the term “faith” as opposed to “religion.” Religion includes the ritual practice in a particular belief system, whereas faith defines a form of personal connection to this belief system. An alternate title for this chapter could have been “Dignity/Karama as Islam” or “Dignity as Religion.” However, the choice of the term “faith” attempts to emphasize the personal connection some feel with the dignity that accompanies their belief system. The notion of dignity/karama is not just related to Islam, but also to a social class that is embedded in one’s religious status and the accompanying process of socialization. Seeing that the structures of religion and faith practice are more than belief systems and are, rather, processes of socialization is very important to comprehend that, similarly to the concept of dignity, people do not have a clear and monolithic understanding of religion and faith. Each person’s social experiences play a significant role in shaping their approach to faith. The findings of this investigation of dignity as faith, thanks to the interviews with protesters and the analysis of some approaches to adapt religion to the state apparatus that are relevant to Egypt, precisely show the multiplicities in understanding the value of human life through dignity when it is connected to faith. There are notably two diverging positions in which dignity, because of one’s faith, is a universal endowment that humans have and that they should unlock, versus one in which dignity is valued through one’s active faith individually and in her society. The chapter also exposes confrontations between religious and secular actors in Egypt historically, as well as contemporaneous, as when they occur in the interviews. It is important to remember that these different actors remain similar in engaging with structures (religion or

secularity) that become their own personal experience through a particular socialization process.

The discussion of a human's worth, central to understanding dignity/karama, is often related to religious studies. Given the broad context of this relationship, the focus here is to look only at the scholarship suggested from the interviews: notably dignity for Spinoza, for Pico della Mirandola and for the secularists versus Islamists debate. This gives a signpost for the understanding of the discussion of karama and faith/religion in the interviews presented in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Most interviewees had some knowledge of Abrahamic religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and recognized in them the centrality of dignity/karama as what distinguishes human beings from other creatures. The centrality of dignity helps in these religions to distinguish humans as creatures of God with divine blessings, and in order to keep those blessings, they need to keep a close relationship with their creator. Indeed, there is evidence in the three religions of the relationship between the human condition and dignity (El Bernoussi, 2015), but can religion celebrate forms of dignity and still cause indignation? According to Baruch Spinoza's critique of religion, it can (Strauss, 1965). The philosopher, who was brought up in Judaism, became dissatisfied with religion and spirituality. He was particularly dissatisfied with the religion's obstruction, in the name of gratitude and satisfaction with being the favored godly creature, of one's feelings of indignation. For Spinoza, these feelings of indignation are needed to trigger a revolutionary wave in the face of increasing injustice (Stolze, 2014). Political philosopher Leo Strauss's reading of Spinoza revealed that despite Spinoza's virulent criticism of religion, he remained a strong believer in God. Spinoza was in some way able to distinguish between his faith and the understandings of religion and spiritual practices (Strauss, 1965). Conversely, it seems that it is Spinoza's belief in God that could suggest an

anti-humanist drive in his philosophy on the centrality of human dignity and could even suggest a definition of dignity as what distinguishes human beings from other animals. Philosopher Yitzhak Melamed supports this argument by focusing on how Spinoza presented humans as marginal constituents of the vast universe and by critiquing anthropomorphism as baseless arrogance from humans (2010). It is important to note, however, that there seems to be no use of the term “dignity” in the translated work of Spinoza – based on my own search for the terms “dignity” and “indignation” in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and *The Ethics: Concerning God* (1677). This brief section on Spinoza relies on readings and interpretations of the philosopher’s work to give an example of confronting issues of dignity and religion.

In this same vein of confronting religion and dignity, one of the respondents in the interviews mentioned the work of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola – whose *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) is credited as the most famous Renaissance speech on the nature of humankind – to showcase an example of a non-Muslim scholar who looked at the religion of Islam to explore the challenging concept of dignity. Indeed, Pico della Mirandola’s early work, similar to Cicero’s, acknowledges the egalitarian dimension of dignity as intrinsic to human nature and as independent from the quality of the actions of an individual. This is quite different from an understanding of dignity as measured by virtue (in Confucianism) or by professional achievement (Roman army, for the Latin *dignitas*). Interestingly, Pico della Mirandola’s oration starts with the assertion by a Muslim that the greatest gift in nature is Man (human beings) itself.¹ This statement is central in Pico della Mirandola’s oration to support the claim that human beings are already inherently endowed with dignity. Pico della Mirandola also explored several other understandings of dignity, not only as human worth, but also as the human’s abilities to be whatever

¹ The quote is: “I once read that Abdala the Muslim, when asked what was most worthy of awe and wonder in this theater of the world, answered, ‘There is nothing to see more wonderful than man!’” from *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

she chooses and limited only by the boundaries she herself defines. This empowering understanding of dignity, as presented by Pico della Mirandola, was often shared by respondents in the interviews, who united a religious sense of *karama* as a human feature and a universal sense of *karama* as a human right.

The empowering characteristic of dignity, in the sense of being special to individuals endowed with a human spirit that must be respected, works well with the approach of international development focusing on agency (Haq, 1995; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000, 2003, 2009). On the other hand, secularists' and Islamists' points of view on development and progress seem to be at odds. Adding to this are feelings, for both some secularists and Islamists, of nostalgia for the past Golden Age of Arab and Muslim cultures (sometimes presented as spanning from the eighth century, with the start of the Abbasid caliphate, to the thirteenth century, with the Mongol invasion of Baghdad) due to feelings of increasing internal weaknesses in many Muslim societies today. It is important to note here that these mostly widespread feelings of nostalgia can be seen in so-called vanquished civilizations, like the Arab and Muslim, and this nostalgia can actually be a social force that operationalizes time and an affect, like that used by different political entities from the Egyptian neo-Wafd party to the Chinese Communist Party (Ajami, 1981, p. 213; Benabdallah, 2020). Nonetheless, one can also see an orientalist understanding of history associated with such feelings of nostalgia, but it is still interesting to see how nostalgia as a social force plays a role in shaping imaginaries of people in the Arab world² because of their perception of being part of a so-called vanquished civilization, which can lead to an instrumentalization of the past to build the future. Considering nostalgia as a structure of feelings (Combs, 1993; Tannock, 1995), one can see how

² In his book, *Hizbullah and the Politics of Remembrance* (2016), Bashir Saade shows that remembrance is an active social and political enterprise for Hizbullah to engage with its environment and plan for the future using a systematic archiving of its human agency, particularly as a resistance to Israel. This active attribute of remembrance seems to contrast with a reactive one of nostalgia.

nostalgia's referent object becomes this emblematic desire for the past that is contrasted with a unsatisfying present (Greene, 1991, p. 305), and that is a point of agreement for some secularists and Islamists whom I talked to when they discuss faith in their current context.

For those expressing nostalgia, some causes of internal weaknesses in the context of the Arab and Muslim world are corruption, superstitious beliefs, ethnic divisions and weakening faith. Various responses to these weaknesses were presented in pre-modern reform movements, especially Wahhabism, in the forms of rejecting the societal order of eighteenth-century Arabia and advocating for a reform that would bring back the order of the *salaf*, that is, the societal order during the first three generations of Muslims. The Islamic Modernism of Mohamed Abduh was also another reform attempt that attempted to marry Islamic faith with the process of modernization in the region. Between 1803 and 1818, the Wahhabis controlled Mecca and established a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna. They called for *ijtihad* (meaning "effort of interpretation" and the utmost effort an individual can put forth in an activity) and opposed *bid' a* (meaning "innovation" and any changes to an imagined original form of Islam), such as Sufi practices. This shows that there was a major debate about reforming society between Islamists (of different sorts) and secularists in societies like Egypt where religion, and particularly Islam, is central. This debate attempted to confront different trajectories of comprehensive reform for developing those societies, but both Islamist and Secularist projects were equally a reaction to modernization and an attempt to blend into local and foreign cultures. These trajectories spanned radical secularism to radical Islamism³. In the case of Egypt, those conflicting trajectories could be seen, for example, in the complex

³ In her book, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition* (2009), Samira Haj presents some of those several attempts to modernize Islam by Al-Afghani, Abduh, etc. The book is an example of some of the great literature about Islam, Tradition, and Modernity, especially on the relation between all these seemingly unconnected currents of Islamic reform and how they reacted to orientalist visions of the region.

relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the State. In this brief background presentation, we will not delve more deeply into analyzing this relationship. We rely, instead, on the interviewees reporting on the Muslim Brotherhood in discussing the relationship between *karama* and faith/religion.

INSTRUMENTALIZING RELIGION

Only one of the respondents in this study had presented himself as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (in an interview prior to June 30, 2013, which was considered by protesters a second revolution of the Arab Uprisings in Egypt and that led to the overthrow of the Mohamed Morsi government). To compensate for the lack of direct accounts from members of the Muslim Brotherhood in this study, the group's official portal, *IkhwanWeb*, was a useful source for some of the members' statements and comments on the 2011 protests in Egypt and also on the subsequent events. On the website, the Brotherhood members state that their leader, Hassan al-Banna, "stroved hard to restore the national rights and to save the Arab dignity" ("*karama*" in the original Arabic form and "dignity" in the English translation) and that one of their principles, as a political body, is to seek "internal and external reformation and [plant] the seeds of dignity within the souls of the citizens."⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood is, therefore, presented as the guardian of righteous dignity. Further statements about the Muslim Brotherhood are discussed in the following sections. Similar to the difficulty of reaching out to members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the "political society" (Chatterjee, 2011), being defined as the most marginalized socioeconomic group of individuals in a postcolonial⁵ society, is also not

⁴ Found in article 24 of Section One on "The History of the Movement" by Muhammad Shawqi Zaki (2007). Source: www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=806.

⁵ Here the term "post" is used to suggest that even if several decades passed after acquiring independence in some countries of the Global South, there is a particular focus on the lingering colonial structures appropriated by authoritarian and dysfunctional states in these decolonized societies.

directly represented in the interviews. Instead, this political society is discussed through the lens of secondary data of interviews with people from the most economically deprived groups in the Egyptian society, which are found in many news outlets.

In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the group seems to include a wide spectrum of individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds. This configuration is portrayed in the movie *The Yaacoubian Building* (2006), directed by Marwan Hamed and adapted from the novel of the same name by Alaa Al Aswany (2002), in which a new member of the Islamist group, Taha, notices immediately that the group comprises people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but that they all left their status at the door of the mosque because they were all equals in front of God. This contrasts with Taha's first day at the university, where he feels marginalized by some of his rich classmates because of his low status, despite his stellar academic records. The movie showcased how Taha's transformation into a Jihadist Islamist was a way to regain a sense of dignity and worth, which was stripped away from him in his own country, because even his hard work could not help him in a corrupt political and social system where crony capitalism and nepotism prevailed.

In Egyptian cinema, the portrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists is often negative. Indeed, political Islam is presented in negative terms in several movies. For instance, Adel Imam's *The Terrorist* (1994) is a case in point. The movie portrays the conversion of Brother Ali away from Islamic radicalism. He moves from his brutish and violent ways to learn tolerance when he encounters a family of moderate Muslims. In the movie, the radical Islamists are presented as ruthless, irrational, confused individuals, and sometimes borderline idiotic. The opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood often operates by dehumanizing the Islamists to deprive them of any dignity.

When looking at expressions of *karama* as faith in 2011 and afterward, in the case of the Arab Uprisings in Egypt, there are some

symbolic examples of processes of humanization and dehumanization that prompt the issue of *karama*/dignity. As an example of humanizing religions, the coexistence between the Christian faith and the Muslim faith in Egypt is presented as a pledge of a religious tolerance and acceptance in today's modern state. However, it is obvious that this statement should be qualified, as there are frictions between the two religious communities. Fears of an escalation of tensions between the two religious communities during the revolution that could lead to sectarian divisions were first disproved by images of unity shared by people observing or taking part in the protests in early 2011. One image that beautifully expresses the resilience of this coexistence shows a circle of Copts delimiting a serene prayer zone for Muslims.

In partnership with the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo, the Dominican priest Benoît Vandeputte organized a six-day cultural trip with the theme "Cairo: Between revolution and Chaos." The trip aimed at giving participants a hands-on experience of the situation in Egypt after the 2011 revolution, and the trip was also an opportunity for participants to meet with both Christian and Muslim parties in Egypt to engage in a dialogue. The participants, including the priest Vandeputte, reported their enthusiasm with the resilience of solidarity between different religious groups in Egyptian society, as witnessed in the streets and squares of Cairo. Another Dominican priest, Emilio Platti, who is partially based in Cairo, gathered a collection of photographs that can be accessed through the website of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo (IDEO), and in which he covered the events of the 2011 revolution from January 2011 to January 2012.⁶

The images are very telling: some of them show revolutionaries celebrating the conviviality between the different religious groups in Egypt, even showing politicians who claimed religious diversity as a

⁶ The collection of photographs of the revolution, by the Dominican priest Emilio Platti, can be accessed through this link in the IDEO's official website: [www.ideo-cairo.org/reports/Thawra25Janvier_Emilio_Platti\[2012\].pdf](http://www.ideo-cairo.org/reports/Thawra25Janvier_Emilio_Platti[2012].pdf).

central value to their campaigns. Other images show deadly attacks on both Christian and Muslim religious sites.

In the pictures taken by priest Emilio Platti that show an open and peaceful dialogue between Christians and Muslims, another interesting element is the mentioning of the Palestinian cause (with "*musalaha filistiniya*" meaning "Palestinian reconciliation") in this interfaith tolerance campaign. This call for a Palestinian truce may refer to the calls for a ceasefire between Hamas (a Sunni Islamist political party) and Fatah (the leading secular political party and the largest faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization) in Palestine as a sign of pan-Arab solidarity. Given the political differences between Hamas (supported by Hezbollah) and Fatah, the interfaith tolerance campaigns in Egypt attempt to call for peaceful dialogue between different religious entities (interfaith) and within the same religious groups (intra-faith) in the region in order to resolve the underlying political conflicts. Moreover, the recurring theme of the Palestinian cause is present not only under the theme of *karama* as faith, but also in the discussion of Arab identity.

The attempts for peaceful dialogues are confronted, on the other hand, by processes of dehumanization of the Other that can lead to violent outbreaks, such as the protests near the Rabaa Al-Adawiya Mosque in August 2013. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood opposed the celebration of the second revolution in 2013, which ousted their leader, former president Mohamed Morsi, and led to the Rabaa events, because they consider it a crime against humanity that cannot be forgotten or celebrated. So, how can humanity be separated from a person in this dehumanizing process? A possible way is to state that this person has no dignity in order to dehumanize her, punish her and justify her marginalization. One image that captures this utterly negative portrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood showed a Brotherhood member using a niqab-wearing woman as a shield and using an infant as a human bomb, while he faced a courageous Egyptian army officer protecting what looked like an Egyptian woman and her baby.

INTERVIEWS

During the interviews, the different signifiers that are referred to in explaining people's involvement in the 2011 Arab Uprisings events in Egypt and their understanding of *karama* were either spontaneous or self-reflective. A spontaneous process seems to be more faithful to the actual feelings and states of mind during the revolution (the respondent looked more emotive and sincere), whereas a self-reflective process seemed to mark a separation between the individual and her past experience (tendency to justify instead of simply utter statements, as seen with more spontaneous responses). As described in the [Introduction](#), I try to separate between what seemed to be a spontaneous answer to defining dignity as something related to one's faith or religion and a self-reflective one in which the respondent may draw from her past experience to present such a definition.

Abdelrahman, who was fifty years old at the time of the interview, teaches both political theory and Western philosophy at a major university and participated in the Arab Uprising protests in Cairo. He could be labeled as a very secular person both in his appearance and in his philosophical thoughts. However, to him, his secular appearance does not conflict with his conservative religious views or, particularly, his sympathy with the legitimacy of the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Abdelrahman started by affirming that *karama* is a "*ni'ma min al islam*" (meaning "a gift from Islam"), and that Muslims ought to be proud of their religion and its emphasis on *karama*. Abdelrahman recited the following *ayah* (Quranic verse) and asked me to look up in which *sura* (Quranic section) this *ayah* appeared. Abdelrahman did not want to commit a "sin" by mixing up the *suras* of the holy book of the Qur'an, which showed his care in providing me with correct information (adding "*astaghfirullah*" meaning, "I beg pardon to God"):

Now indeed, We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam (as a birth right, regardless of where the child is born). And provided them with transport on land and sea and given them decent things

of life. And We have favored the humans far above a great many of Our creation.⁷ (*Ahmed, 2003*)

Abdelrahman proudly uttered that this very *ayah* is the proof of the superiority of Islam over other religions and also a proof of the importance of karama to Muslims. When I asked Abdelrahman to explain more of what this karama in Islam means, he replied that it is the behavior of the righteous faithful (*mu'min*). I then responded that there might be a contradiction between an understanding of karama as intrinsic to the human condition, that is, as in the worth of being human in and of itself, and one of karama that depends on human behavior, that is, in the socially assessed worth of one's actions that can command respect from others. Abdelrahman disagreed with me and added that the two understandings are actually the same thing because the human condition is related to human behavior.

Because I could not agree that the human condition was the same thing as the human behavior, from my understanding, and I couldn't see how the two seemed to be the same thing from Abdelrahman's view, I thought Abdelrahman and I had reached an impasse. However, I came to understand a bit later that what Abdelrahman wanted to convey to me was that one can lose one's human condition if one does not engage in the proper Muslim behavior. I gave Abdelrahman the example of the behavior of a pedophile and asked him if such a person still has karama, given the fact that the person's behavior is not considered righteous, but even so, the person remains a human being. Abdelrahman shrugged his shoulders and

⁷ Both the transliteration and the translation used are by Shabbir Ahmed in his official translation of the Qur'an (*The Qur'an as It Explains Itself*, 2003). Surat Al Isra (17:70). Another translation can be found in the Oxford World Classics series volume, *The Qur'an* (2004), by M. A. S. Abdel-Haleem: "We have honoured the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea; We have provided good sustenance for them and favoured them specially above many of those We have created."

replied that this is a “*hayawan*” (meaning “animal” in a derogatory sense) who has no *karama* whatsoever (it seemed here that Abdelrahman assumed that “*hayawan*” practiced pedophilia, but most importantly, Abdelraham seemed to infer that one’s action and behavior can lead to one losing her human attribute of dignity). Abdelrahman added that those who engage in “*fasad*” (meaning “corruption”) do not have any dignity, and then he quickly reminded me that the creed of the Muslim Brotherhood is to eradicate *fasad*.

Magdy was a twenty-six-year-old journalist living in Giza when I interviewed him in 2015. Despite his parents’ disapproval of the first protests, Magdy went to Tahrir Square on January 25, compelled to participate in the revolution as a professional journalist and because he was a young Egyptian. Magdy stated that his parents’ savings enabled him to study journalism in the United States. Magdy loves surfing. His perfectly tanned features and brightly colored Hawaiian shirt made him seem that he had just finished catching some waves on a California beach. Magdy’s appearance seemed to be in line with his secular views. He also considered himself an atheist, and he claimed that atheism is much more widespread in Egyptian society than people might think. I asked if there were any official data on the number of atheists in Egypt, and he replied that there cannot be any such official data, as people would be too embarrassed to admit their atheism. Magdy is adamantly critical toward the Muslims Brotherhood’s leadership, declaring, “The Muslim Brotherhood people do not understand real dignity.” He added, “Throughout the history, they destroyed this country (*kharabo al balad*) and they want to do it again today.” I asked him how they managed to destroy the country, and he responded, “By pulling the country backwards.”

For Waleed, who was a young active student during the protests and who then moved to the Gulf for work, Islam had no place during the revolution. Waleed added that there were young Islamists joining the protests, but that his group, *Kefaya*, asked the young Islamists to be neutral and not to act as they did in the 1990s in trying to hijack the entire group’s ideology. He also added that this new generation

does not care about Islam. When I asked him about the practicing young men and veiled women, for instance, he replied that they act that way more for the "*taqlid*" (in the sense of following trends) and that it is more of a social behavior. I then asked him about the involvement of the Copts in the protests, and he presented two different reactions within this community: those from the countryside who claimed to be more aligned with the religious establishment and those from the Nile Delta region (*el wegha el bahria*) who seemed disillusioned with their current religious leaders and were sometimes even against the church. He cautioned, however, that both parties still need their church because of the political protection it provides.

Hagar, who was a successful thirty-six-year-old financial analyst from Cairo, flew from London to Cairo on January 26, 2011, to be close to her parents and younger siblings in Egypt and to witness this "most important event in the history of Egypt," according to her. Along with having a shiny smartphone cover, Hagar also wore a rainbow-colored *hijab* and adopted a very trendy style that made her look like the coolest kid on the block. When I asked about Islam and *karama*, which to me was in no way a question about her *hijab*, she directly replied that everyone is free to do what they want to do, including wearing the *hijab*, and that there was nothing extremist about it because one could be very open-minded and wear it. She continued, saying that she even went to bars with her colleagues in London after work, and in response to the puzzled look on my face, she added that she would always order virgin cocktails as a "*Muslima*." I first met Hagar in 2008, before she wore the *hijab*, and I suspect that her upfront discussion of the *hijab* might have been related to her thinking that I could be wondering about why she had decided to wear it. Hagar's message to me remains important because she used her own case to debunk the misconception that conservative attitudes toward religion would necessarily be intolerant.

Boutros, whose life was split between France and Egypt, presented another example of this marriage between tolerance and Islam. He started by saying that he was currently going through a midlife

crisis (as he recently turned fifty years young), which did not seem to have any relationship with the topics of our discussion other than, perhaps, cautioning me about the influence of the so-called crisis in his interpretations of the revolution. Boutros is Christian but “not a very practicing one,” in his words. He noted that the relationship between Christians and Muslims is exemplary in Egypt. He quickly added that most Christians in Egypt have a lot of respect for Muslims and their religion. Boutros comes from the upper middle class of Egyptian society, according to him. However, he does not like to be associated with the wealth of his family and stated that his lifestyle is very simple. He thinks that materialism and the passion for money in modern societies is a real problem. Boutros also defended the Muslim Brotherhood and believes that they are the right leaders for Egyptian society. He added that Islamism is natural in a society where a majority of the population are very strong advocates of Islam, and these Islamists should be allowed to govern, as this is the wish of the people. The problem, for him, is continually repressing this will. Boutros added laughingly that people often tell him he defends Islamism even better than some Muslims do. In contrast, Ameen, one of the interviewees who is a PhD candidate in the field of public administration and who claims to be a fervent Muslim, called for continuous rebellion against the system and against the politicization of Islam to distance faith/religion from governance.

From the repeated interviews, it seemed that the need for tolerance and the need to respect individual liberties included the need to respect Islamization of the society, even if it was interpreted as a radicalization. This need to respect and tolerate the Islamizing society in Egypt and around the world was expressed by both Boutros and Hagar. It is important to note that both Boutros and Hagar lived for many years in the West, which could have influenced their views. It is also important to state again that these interviews were conducted mainly in Arabic and two to four years after the 2011 protests. In the last chapter, I go back to interview one of the respondents to ask him what he thinks about the different themes now.

CONCLUSIONS

The dimension of religion and faith is not only about spirituality but also about affirming political views and constructing a social order. In this sense, it is important to explore the political and social dimensions of instrumentalizing the religious arguments demanded by *karama*, for instance, the empowerment of an Islamist political party or the justifications regarding gender roles in Islam. The instrumentalization of religious arguments can also serve to humanize or dehumanize particular groups of people, as seen in the section on expressions of *karama* in the 2011 uprisings and after. In this section, it is important to first contextualize the relevance of confronting the religious theme in Egypt to the *karama* demands in the 2011 uprisings and to reflect on the struggle between Islamist political parties confronted with secularist and modernizing regimes.

An important question to ask when thinking about *karama* as a religious dimension is whether there is an attempt, on the one hand, to secularize the uprising and the so-called January 25 revolution or, on the other hand, to Islamize it. This pragmatic questioning helps to understand the forces that tried to shape the 2011 events in Egypt. When looking at human expressions of *karama* as faith and at the relevant information from interviews, it seems that the protesters, for the most part, aimed at being distant from *karama*, as a strictly Islamic concept, in order to embrace both a global and a secular understanding of *karama*. This was meaningful as an attempt to keep religion out of the revolution dynamic. Yet, it is important to note that the events were not univocal, as they were complex and reflective of multiple opinions. For the most part, the answer could be that, yes, there was an attempt to secularize the revolution to some extent, as some people claimed that they did not want the Islamists or the Muslim Brotherhood to steal the revolution of 2011 in Egypt, as seen with the interviews (Waleed, for instance).

The Islamist political parties in Egypt and other countries of the Middle East and North Africa have competed for power for several

decades, and even secularist leaders were often devout Muslim practitioners (Cammatt et al., 2013), for example, the former Algerian president Houari Boumediene and, of course, Nasser. The former ruling Islamist party in Turkey – the Justice and Development Party, or AKP – also stressed Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s devoted practice of Islam despite his embrace of secular values, appearance and political discourse. The problem of Islam and politics in the region has remained, however, a highly controversial subject, particularly due to the battle that opposes secularist and Islamist groups. One needs to add that possibilities of a dialogue between opposing parties is not necessarily facilitated in an undemocratic setting, as found in many countries of the region. Moreover, the international community also had little incentive to reverse this situation. Actually, there are several cases of inconsistencies from democratic countries that supported authoritarian regimes in the region right before the start of the Arab Uprising, but quickly began condemning these very same regimes, as in the case of Tunisia.

This religious dimension of *karama* that links *karama* to the humanity of all the children of Adam in Islam is quite similar to the universal dimension of human dignity as a fundamental human right, in its all-encompassing goal (Kamali, 2002), and that follows in the [next chapter](#).

2 Dignity as Identity

We lack nothing, but dignity.

Muhammed al Maghut, Syrian poet, 1934–2006

One of the important components in the construction of nationality is consolidating a sense of identity. Karama/dignity – in the sense of being an image of God with inherent worth – has consolidated for millennia a sense of identity for humans. In this discussion of karama as identity in the slogans of the 2011 Arab Uprising protests in Egypt, it is pertinent to first briefly expose some elements of my own identity as an Arab and how they relate to the subjects of my research. It is also important to clarify, as suggested with the chapter's opening quote from al Maghut's work, that there is a widespread understanding of the lack of dignity in Arab contexts, mostly due to oppressive political regimes.

I was born and raised in Morocco, where I pursued my studies in business and finance. However, my interest in politics was first piqued in a class on comparative political systems with Cold War specialist Thane Gustafson during my exchange program in the United States. Later on, for my graduate work there, I specialized in the politics of North Africa and the Middle East. My background in finance and international relations made me sensitive to parallel developments in the world economy and international political economy, and so I reference these fields in my chapters.

My interviewees had a tendency to include me in their groups by using phrases like, "*we* Arabs are the same," and "*they* [referring to non-Arabs] do not understand *us*," which reinforced this *feeling* that we share something with each other more than with non-Arab others. As I was living in New York and in touch with several Arab communities within the city, I empathized with these communities' worries

and feelings concerning their countries as I was experiencing my own about my country, which was also involved in the Arab Uprising. I felt an urge and a responsibility to go back to my home country and be with my family at these unprecedented times in my life, in which the unexpected, a large-scale popular protesting of authoritarian regimes, was happening. I left New York for Morocco on February 22, 2011, and witnessed, firsthand, the difference between the media reports and the reality on the ground. There were speculations in the news coverage that both escalated and downplayed the clashes between protesters and police.¹ Given my readings in postcolonial theory at the time, I also kept looking at the colonial legacy in those regional struggles. I was particularly drawn to the need for a discourse of dignity in these events, and this is how the idea for my research topic was born. Egypt was a very interesting case to study, not only because of the country's centrality in the Arab world, but also because of the clear use of the *karama* claim as a revolutionary slogan.

Oftentimes in this study, there is reference to the Arab world as a single compound. It is important, however, to note that there are several differences between Arab countries (mostly the difference between the East and the West), and that even what are considered similarities between these countries, such as the Arab identity, ought to be reconsidered. The idea of a homogeneous Arab identity in the region, for example, is a misconception (consider the different influences of Maghrebi identities with strong Amazigh characteristics, versus Shami identities with Levantine characteristics, or versus Khaliji identities with Bedouin particularities, for instance). Moreover, most of the similarities between the countries of the region concern undesirable traits, such as social distress and paucity of democratic processes (Messari, 2011). Economic vulnerability has

¹ Zaynab El Bernoussi, "Opinion – The Arab Uprisings Ten Years On," *E-International Relations*, February 4, 2021. www.e-ir.info/2021/02/04/opinion-the-arab-uprisings-ten-years-on/.

been another important common trait of the countries of the region since their independence.

BACKGROUND

To talk about the Arab world, it is important to see first where it is geographically concentrated, meaning the so-called Middle East. The term “Middle East” is the Western label for the countries of southwestern Asia. It has sometimes even included southeastern Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia. To be more precise, the term “Middle East” may have originated in the 1850s in the India Office of the British Empire.² Another theory for its origin is the term became more widely known when American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan used it in 1902 to talk about “the area between Arabia and India.” Originally, Egypt was not considered as part of the “Middle East,” but the term has expanded to now include North Africa (and so the acronym MENA is often used). Egypt is, indeed, a major country in the Middle East due to its geostrategic and demographic magnitude. Egypt is not only the most populated country in the Middle East, but also one of the most populated countries in Africa and in the Muslim world. This constitutes the Egyptian triple identity (Arab, Islamic and African).

Participants often stressed their Arab identity as Egyptians in the interviews, particularly in relation to *karama*. Algerian-born philosopher Hélène Cixous talked about an “Arabitude” (1997), or what I refer to as “Arabness,” to designate the plethora of elements that constitute an Arab identity shared among people from even the farthest areas of the region and to differentiate this state of being from the practice of Arabism, which is an ideological movement promoting unification of Arab states and populations. It is important to keep in mind that though Arab ethnicity can be dated far back (before Islam), Arabism as a political practice among Arab-speaking countries is

² Peter Beaumont, Gerald H. Blake and J. Malcolm Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study* (David Fulton, 1988), 16.

more recent, and it is likely that it began only with the demise of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the Arab Uprisings in Egypt, there was a particular revival of Arabism in addition to Islamism, which developed in most of the region after the 1979 Iranian revolution and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini. This more recent revival of Arabism has also entered the discourse of Islamism as opposed to the secular Arabism of Nasser. Indeed, even though the two movements find themselves almost at the opposite ends of the political spectrum in Egypt, they are still often conflated for self-serving purposes.

The feeling of identity is a feeling of distinction from something Other, and it seems that in thinking about one's identity, one distances herself from another, or from a foreigner, which could explain the need to talk about foreign powers when reflecting on Arab identity, as this was the main mechanism of Orientalism as a description of the East while reflecting on the West. In this section on the background of the theme of Arab identity, I will start the discussion about the important link between Islam and Arab identity, then the criticality of the economic context before and during the Arab Uprisings to understand the constituents of an Arab identity relating to pan-Arabism (*qawmiyya*) and an Egyptian identity relating to solidarity between different local groups (*qotriyya*).

The idea of the Arab identity needs to be put in the religious context of Islam. This approach is not new, as notable scholars in the field such as Albert Hourani (1991), Abdallah Laroui (1974) and John Esposito and John Donohue (2007), to name a few, have taken a similar path. Even Orientalist Bernard Lewis stressed the need to take the upheavals of the Islamic community since the last crusade into consideration in order to understand the problems of political instability in the Arab world today (1990). Of course, Arab identity is not only based on Islam, as there are other religions that are also part of this identity. In this sense, it is important to note that a national Islamo-Christian dimension was celebrated in Tahrir, particularly concerning solidarity between local groups (*qotriyya*), which was seen with the

combining of the symbol of the crucifix and the Qur'an or the flag of the Wafd party (one of Egypt's opposition groups that boasted a nationalist and secularist doctrine).

Michaëlle Browers' work deals more with a struggle for equality and citizenship in Arab political thought. According to her, the lack of equality and the weakness of feelings of citizenry might be sustaining an Arab identity crisis (2009). Browers calls for ideological debates and conceptual changes in this respect. Her work explores the relationship between said citizenship and the notion of *nahda* (meaning "Arab Renaissance"). Building on the work of Browers and including the more recent events in the region, it seems that there are three critical moments in the construction of Arab citizenship: (1) national independence; (2) the 1967 war (or Six-Day War) launched by the Arab community against Israel, in which the Arab community suffered a humiliating defeat; and (3) the events of the Arab Uprisings. Interestingly, all three moments on the timeline of an Arab identity construction refer to violent episodes in which authoritarianism played a major role. Shadi Hamid, from the Brookings Institution, precisely examines this difficulty that Arab communities have when attempting to break from authoritarian rule and relates this difficulty to more fundamental issues of failure in self-governance.³ Intending to trigger curiosity with such a shocking revelation, Hamid is not trying to imply that there is something inherently wrong with Arabs that makes them unworthy of democracy; instead, he tries to show that the focus on neoliberal development in these countries impedes proper implementation of a democratic culture. Hamid especially talks about the case of Egypt in which the El Sisi government's emphasis on rectifying the distressed economy helped to get him to power. For Hamid, Egypt's democratic future needs to include a scenario in which the Egyptian society accepts the return of the Muslim Brotherhood to the political scene.

³ Shadi Hamid, "The Brotherhood Will Be Back," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2014.

The work of political scientist Michael Willis does not directly address questions of pan-Arabism in general, as he focuses on Maghreb studies. However, his perspective is informing as it draws a parallel between Tunisia's Ennahda and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (2006, 2014). Willis cautions about the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood in creating a democratic environment in Egypt, comparing it to the more effective role of the Ennahda Islamists in Tunisia. Willis advances that the Muslim Brotherhood has been repeatedly dismissed from power in Egypt because of their feeble stance on nationalism and the Egyptian identity. However, this argument may seem very weak, as this could be only an excuse to justify marginalization of the Brethren from power. Willis also saw a successful former leadership by the Ennahda group compared to the Brethren, which accounted for Ennahda's success as a party with an Islamist ideology and in contrast to the Brethren (Willis, 2006, 2014). The Islamists in Tunisia recurrently separated their views from those of the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Willis, the Ennahda Islamists would say that unlike Egypt, Tunisia has a stronger history of constitutional tradition, a distinctive civic culture and a different nationalist history. For Willis, the Muslim Brotherhood would rarely be heard uttering such patriotic and nationalist statements because the Brotherhood doesn't really see themselves as Egyptians, but, rather, as Muslims and members of the larger Islamic community. The opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood would, therefore and according to Willis, capitalize on the diluted nationalist discourse of the Brotherhood and would claim that the Brotherhood is not even proud to be Egyptians. This claim of anti-nationalism is a strategy used against the Brotherhood.

Earlier in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group attempted to embrace nationalism in the 1990s, yet the effort seemed dubious. Around this period, the Ennahda continued stressing that their ideology on political regimes was very different from that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, Ennahda was one of the first Islamist groups in the 1980s that would say they wanted democracy in

Tunisia. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, stated for a long time that democracy was not Islam, and there were other political models in Islam that ought to be followed. Of course, this discourse has changed during the recent Muslim Brotherhood leadership in the deposed Morsi government, as the group stressed democratic values. Willis also points out that the surprising decision of Morsi's government to appoint Dr. Hicham Qandil – a low-profile nationalist biotechnology professor and Minister of Water Resources – to the post of prime minister during Morsi's presidency was an attempt to revamp the Brotherhood's image as a nationalist party. These diverging views on the Brotherhood's nationalism also appeared in the interviews. Whether the group is considered nationalist or not, it seems that politically active movements in the region must show allegiance to a common identity promoted by the state. This is also explained by the need for these movements to survive within the space of the state.

The theme of tragedy supports the idea that there is a crisis of the Arab Muslim identity. In the context of Egypt, feelings of uneasiness with the local identity could stem from the realities of economic inequality and sectarian tensions. Also, Egypt's (and the larger Arab community's) accumulation of defeats against Israel as well as its signing of a peace treaty with Israel, which was interpreted by anti-Israel camps as a betrayal of Arab unity, contributed to discomfort with local leadership. Amal Abdul-Qassem Donqol was a staunch opponent of Sadat's peace treaty with Israel, and he expressed in his work a salient pessimism not only with local leadership, but also with an entire generation of Egyptians and Arabs in the 1980s. Donqol also talks about the "inferiority of the [Arab] culture" to express his self-mutilating generalizations, best seen with his short poem "We Are All Losers" ("*Kuluna Fashilun*") (Osman, 2010, p. 7). Donqol does not speak for an entire generation of Egyptians in the 1980s, but he probably best expresses an angst that was extant in Egyptian society because of the realities of economic and societal dysfunction (and in many other countries of the Arab region). It is important to see that

this “deconstruction” of an Arab problem is noteworthy through the work of intellectuals such as Edward Said, who saw powerlessness as a fundamental issue facing Arab societies since colonial times (1978).

A POSTCOLONIAL SETTING

The historian Albert Hourani declared a climax of Arabism in the 1950s and the 1960s with popular nationalism and the ascendancy of Nasserism as a doctrine that specially appealed to nationalist and confessional sentiments of the Muslim urban poor in Egypt (Asad and Owen, 1983). But with the war of 1967, this Arabism turned into a period of disunity and intensified with the crisis of 1973, which was the third of the Arab–Israeli wars (Hourani, 1991). Hourani also noticed an ebbing of Arab nationalism after the 1970s due to the predominance of U.S. influence, the interdependence of Arab countries and the increasing Arab disunity. For Hourani, this decrease in nationalism could be traced back to a period of disturbance in the Arab world beginning in 1967, due to widening ethnic, religious and socioeconomic gaps and to the disempowerment of women in Arab societies. There was a heritage of renewal – or *nahda* – in the background of Arab societies at that time, but the fragility of regimes mixed with the stability of authoritarianism cut short the attempts to revive the spirit of the people.

Despite these drawbacks to Arabism, Hourani notes that other elements contributed to reinforcing Arab identity. The Arabic language was one of these important elements. Egyptian radio programs broadcasting Nasser’s long speeches and Oum Keltoum’s captivating melodies were one way to strengthen Arabic as a mode of expression across the region. The newspaper *Al Ahram* and the political radio program *The Voice of the Arabs* hosted by Mohamed Hassanein Heikal were other tools that established the dominance of Egyptian media production and publications. He was notoriously vocal in his celebration of Arabism, especially with regard to Nasser who, according to Heikal, represented Arab dignity (Heikal, 1973, p. 17; Rogan, 2011). Indeed, Egyptian Arabic became one of the most widely

understood and spoken dialects in the Arab world thanks to popular comedies and TV shows (Hourani, 1991; Laroui, 1974).

Identities can be consolidated through narratives as they enable ideas of how a group becomes “people” and moves from one generation to another (Bhabha, 1990). In many societies of the Global South, the modern colonial experience is still present in these narratives, because such colonialism was imposed less than a century ago. To discuss nationalist narratives, it is also important to see the influences of identity perceptions. Juan Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti, in this respect, find that there are two separate approaches when looking at nation and identity in conjunction: a mainstream body of scholars who see national states as social formation and another body of scholars, mostly postcolonial theorists, who see those national states as instances of struggle with national consciousness (2002, p. 189). In the essay “Who Am I? The Identity Crisis in the Middle East” (2006), Middle East expert P. R. Kumaraswamy states:

More than democratic deficit, most countries of the Middle East suffered from fundamental problems over their national identities. More than three-quarters of a century after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, from which most of them emerged, these states have been unable to define, project and maintain a national identity that is both inclusive and representative. (p. 1)

Even after states of the Middle East gained their independence and colonization ended in most parts of the world, social fragmentation and both civil and international war continued in the region. In the book *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses* (2004), Tunisian scholar Larbi Sadiki states that the issues with national identity in the Middle East are, at least in part, consequences of the Orientalist indifference of the European empires, when they delineated colonial borders to satisfy their political interests, rather than to serve the indigenous population. These borders have often sparked virulent fights as their creators ignored

local history and the geographic and tribal borderlines that natives had long recognized (Nasrallah, 2018). This Orientalist indifference was often motivated by the aim of establishing a Westernized version of the Middle East.

Along with borders, leadership was another problem. In his essay, Kumaraswamy noted that:

[In] places like Iraq and Jordan, leaders of the new sovereign states were brought in from the outside, [and] tailored to suit colonial interests and commitments. Likewise, most states in the Persian Gulf were handed over to those [Europeanized colonial subjects] who could protect and safeguard imperial interests in the post-withdrawal phase. (2006, p. 1)

In Iraq and in Jordan, the leaders were descended from the Hashemite dynasty of the Hejaz (which is in today's Saudi Arabia). At the time of decolonization, the problems of borders and leadership persisted. Indeed, "with notable exceptions like Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Syria, most [countries] ... [have] had to [re]invent, their historical roots" when they became independent and "like its colonial predecessor, postcolonial identity owes its existence to force" (Sadiki, 2004, p. 122). However, it is important to note that despite the criticism presented by Kumaraswamy, the Hashemite dynasty, particularly in Jordan, had legitimacy because they were considered the guardians of the Holy Sites of Mecca and Medina (through their Quraishi lineage). The pan-Arab nationalists also supported the Hashemites' legitimacy, and there were local rites of allegiance (*bay'a*).

The movement *Tamarrod* (meaning "rebellion" in Arabic) was founded to gather signatures on a petition to oust former president Mohamed Morsi and thus played a crucial role in current Egyptian politics. This movement is one in a series of activist groups in Egypt that are interestingly both anti-government and anti-foreign intervention (as seen in Figure 2.1, later in the chapter). It is noteworthy that even after several decades following independence, some activist groups in Egypt still see foreign power as a threat. This could also be

contextualized in the background of the 2011 foreign military intervention in Libya, mainly led by countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Groups such as the movement *Tamarrod*, in their tackling of both internal problems and addressing international issues, present a case of lingering postcolonial identity crisis. The book *Overstating the Arab State* (1996) by Nazih Ayubi and the article "Is Jordan Palestine?" (2003) by Raphael Israeli deal with the psychological issues of this possibly fragmented postcolonial identity. These issues are due to a constructed identity that has been determined by the political, social, cultural and economic effects of Western colonialism in the region. Again, this identity could be related to the geographic and cultural colonial boundaries demarcated during the modern colonial period. Colonial officers often overlooked the tribal and clan relations that natives had initially recognized as the basis for their familiar geographic borders in their communities. Another element of arbitrariness in the social management during the colonial period was the implementation of educational programs with cultural elements foreign to the natives' cultures, which again was problematic to the crystallization of the locals' national identities. Hence, several works of postcolonial literature about the Middle East, such as those of Ayubi and Israeli, examine how the Western discourses about identity formation still continue to generate discrepancies, reinforcing the existence and inconsistent nature of a postcolonial national identity among the peoples of the Middle East region.

It is important to keep in mind these problems of incoherent national identity when thinking about implementing models of democracy and local regimes in the region. Indeed, the normalized violence from authoritarian local governments and foreign powers against the people has almost become part of a postcolonial national identity.

Prior to the Arab Uprisings, social movements in the region had little power and were often banned by local governments, which created a lack of trust in the effectiveness of civil society and civil

action in countries such as Egypt. This historical repression of civil action in the region, with the case of North Africa, might partially explain the issue of democratization in the region. Emphasis on civism was central during the 2014 Arab Citizenship conference in Rabat, at which several sessions were dedicated to thinking about increasing civism after the Arab Uprisings. The sessions included young participants from Bahrain, Egypt, and Morocco, who stressed the need to maintain the territorial integrity of these countries, despite ethnic tensions, in order to fix the fragmented postcolonial identity of these countries by embracing plurality. These statements contrasted with those of some groups during the Arab Uprisings, especially in Morocco and Algeria, who claimed identity differences to justify their separatist causes.⁴ The youth representatives from Morocco during the 2014 Arab Citizenship conference also focused on the concept of *hogra* (meaning “humiliation” in colloquial Moroccan Arabic) as a catalyst for social movements in the different countries participating in the Arab Uprisings. Larbi Sadiki’s work, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses* (2004), tackles this problem of humiliation in many Arab societies and states that even though the region’s countries had gained their independence and ended colonialism, social fragmentation and war both internally (civil) and with foreign powers continued in the Middle East region. Due to this political instability and the conflicts of interest, feelings of identity crisis grew.

Dignity politics are connected to identity politics and, thus, they can help instrumentalize crises of identity by escalating the feelings of identity marginalization and alienation to a straight-up oppression of human life. Unlike politics of identity, dignity politics can be more inclusive because of the claim that dignity is the source

⁴ I refer particularly to the Mouvement Autonome Kabyle (MAK), a separatist Berber movement led by folksinger Ferhat Mehenni. A discussion of this issue can be found in Capser Wuite’s article, “The Politics of Identity: A Berber Spring in Algeria?” *Fair Observer*, August 3, 2012. www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/politics-identity-berber-spring-algeria/.

of universal human rights, which goes beyond particular ethnic groups. Dignity politics, through their potential for inclusivity, can also serve to prevent conflict and ease reconciliation through highlighting empathy, which is embedded in understanding dignity as the worthiness of everyone (Hicks, 2011; Rosen, 2012).

During the 2014 Arab Citizenship conference, Salwa Ismail, an expert in Egyptian politics, commented on the violations of civil rights in postcolonial Egypt along with an ill-fated understanding of citizenship. Together, these contributed to the Egyptian subject formation, in the sense of normalizing the understanding of the predatory approach of the state toward its people. Ismail accounted for the feelings of brutal humiliation by the police forces in this subject formation. She used the expression *hibat addawla* (meaning “fear of the state” in Arabic) to describe how the state was able to influence the emotions of the people. This fear also led to the so-called territorialized identity, according to Ismail.

The influence of the state in identity construction can also be analyzed through the spectrum of Foucauldian governmentality. Indeed, governmentality stresses the way in which people are taught to govern themselves. This mechanism works by shifting power from a central authority, like a state or a government institution, and diffusing this power among a population. For instance, the fear of the state can reproduce internal governments, or controlling mechanisms, within the individuals themselves. Individuals avoiding misconduct more because of their fear of the state’s punishment than because of a moral duty is an example. A form of governmentality can, therefore, be understood as conduct molded as response to the government’s rules, making the government not only a set of institutions, but also an embodied experience for the individuals themselves.

The work of cultural anthropologist Partha Chatterjee on the power relation between the state and the people shows that the distance between the governing and the governed should be revised because groups that can appear powerless (for instance, those who have very limited resources or connections with power) can also exert

power on the state (2011). The state's claim of safeguarding national dignity, with the state being a powerful entity, can in this case be challenged by less powerful groups that claim a right to dignity, such as the destitute and marginalized. When looking back at history, particularly in the context of the rise of nationalism and national dignity in countries like Egypt with Nasser, one can see how less powerful entities such as the Islamists also used a dignity discourse against the state.

Nationalist discourses, such as those of Nasser, are an expression of a realist epistemology that undermines the influence of historical development and interconnections between modes of knowledge (Mattern, 2003). Post-independence movements had an interest in state control that is arguably as strong as the regimes they fought against. Again, in a critical perspective it is important for this study to view historical developments (particularly modernity and the development project after World War II) in understanding the objects of inquiry (here being some peoples' understanding of *karama* in different contexts). Therefore, despite my focus on those interviewees and the material studied, I attempt to avoid a totally relativist epistemology by recognizing the influence of social experience and historical materialism.

EXPRESSIONS OF KARAMA AND IDENTITY

Theater and novels are useful resources when examining the dichotomies between expectations and reality in the construction of the Egyptian identity, which encompasses Arab and Muslim features. Naguib Mahfouz's work is abundant with examples of these dichotomies between an imagined expectation and a deceiving reality (El Enany, 2003). One notable example is his novel *The Search* (first published as *Attariq*) in which the author directly referred to dignity/*karama* as only an ideal that does not correspond to reality (Mahfouz, 1964). Indeed, the novel's main protagonist, Saber, is searching for his father after the death of his mother, who had just revealed the identity of the father. With little money in hand, Saber's *karama* is used and

abused in several episodes in the story. The story is set in the late 1950s, when Nasser ruled Egypt. Nasser, was to many Egyptians the personification of *karama* (also cited in the interviews), yet, ironically, the story shows an Egypt, under his rule, where *karama* was too often violated.

Another major work on the popular scene was the 1997 comedy-drama play *Houda Karama*, the title a reference to the protagonist's name ("Houda" being a nickname for the first name "Mahmoud" and "Karama" being the last name). The play started by introducing this Egyptian ("*masry ibn masr*," meaning, "Egyptian son of Egypt" to stress his real Egyptian-ness) who possessed everything in moderation ("*bayna wa bayn*," meaning "in between") except for his *karama*, which was whole and most important to him. This man with a strong sense of *karama* – and ironically called Karama – was humiliated throughout the play in comedic situations that often bordered on the sarcastic. For instance, he was jailed instead of two foreigners who were the actual criminals just because of his Egyptian-ness. The play had numerous satirical descriptions of the political regimes in the region, in which the leaders were compared to shepherds and the people to sheep. Alaa Al Aswany's *Yacoubian Building* (2002), which was turned into a movie in 2006, also stressed the past glorious days of Egypt's grandeur compared to its current state of filth, as the main protagonist, Zaki Pasha (Adel Imam), cried that Cairo used to be cleaner and more beautiful than Paris itself.

In the same year of the release of *Houda Karama*, Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *Honor* (1997) also revealed irony regarding Egyptian-ness by presenting four tales of contrast between honor and humiliation. I am citing this novel because the reference to "honor" is worthwhile in the discussion of *karama*, since "honor" is one of the meanings of *karama* in Arabic (also translated into "*sharaf*"). In *Honor*, there is a story about an Egyptian unjustly condemned for killing a foreigner that is similar to the story of *Huda Karama* (but not presented as a comedy). These stories of Egyptians disregarded by the judicial system, compared to

foreigners, and notably Westerners, are recurrent in Egyptian literature and popular art and are inspired by real events. The Denshawai Incident is a case in point of injustices in legal cases involving both foreigners and Egyptians. In 1906, British military officers entered into a conflict with local villagers in Denshawai. The villagers protested the officers' shooting pigeons for sport in the area, since the pigeons were a source of food for the villagers. The protest led to the death of one local villager and one British officer, prompting a brutal response from British authorities against the villagers (Fahmy, 2011). The British officer died of sunstroke in his attempt to flee the scene as he murdered a complaining local villager, and the punishment was hanging four villagers and flogging twenty-six others (Fahmy, 2011, p. 92). This early context, in modern Egypt, of privileging foreigners, sometimes over locals, and the feelings of injustice this could lead to, was engraved in the modern institutionalization of the Egyptian State under the Muhammad Ali dynasty of Albanian origin that ruled, consequently, as a foreign dynasty. The Ali dynasty was very keen on introducing mixed courts in Egyptian Islamic society to ensure that the foreign elite would not be marginalized in a Muslim context.

GLOBALIZATION AND IDENTITY

It is important to remember that in a time of accelerated development of communication technologies, globalization has contributed to increasing transnational identities (Scholte, 2005). Arab identity, being linked to a fairly large region stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Sea in the east, has to some extent benefited from the ever-faster technologies of communication to strengthen itself as a transnational identity. Arab identity has been central to the events of the Arab Uprisings and has enforced a feeling of shared community among Arab societies, at least during the time of the first uprisings in 2011. For instance, several photographs show Egyptian protesters brandishing flags of other Arab countries, an image that was highly mediatized in the reporting of the 2011 events

in Egypt and other countries of the region. Another example can be seen with a reported joke⁵ by the Tahrir protesters:

I suggest we systemize training for revolutions ... and I call for our Arab brothers to come for the training sessions, we want to free the Arab world at last ... and we want the next Arab summit, God permitting, to be an introductory meeting (to get to know each other) in Tahrir Square.

In this sort of joke, the irony is that this is unlikely to happen because even protesters seemed to be in disbelief of their uprising abilities. Therefore, it would be unlikely that this newfound ability to stand up to the authorities could be systemized and generalized to all of the Arab world. Here, the implicit meaning is that Arabs are unlikely to lead revolutions and are destined to almost a slave status under their ruling regimes. The joke, therefore, becomes poignant because it shows hope (the joking part), when in reality the future of Arab unity seems hopeless.

In an Arab, Islamic and postcolonial context, the understanding of *karama* may stem from cultural appropriation. Other important dimensions in understanding *karama* include providing an environment where universalist values of democracy, development and human rights are protected. Yet, processes of democratization are a major problem in the region. In a conference at the American University of Cairo, Norman Finkelstein stated that the problem of the paucity of democratization in the region could be related to Israel's fear that Arabs would gain back their dignity in properly functioning democracies. According to Finkelstein, flourishing democracies in the region could annihilate the Israeli use of war as it pretends that force is the only language Arabs understand. Finkelstein also expressed hope in El Baradei's presidential campaign during the time of the first elections after the 2011 revolution in Egypt and called Mubarak a nonthinking creature in a typical

⁵ From *Ashaab Yurid: Hatafat, Shi'arat, Nukat* (Al Arabi Linashr, 2011), 91.

Finkelsteinian satire.⁶ Finkelstein explained that as long as Israel has the upper hand in military force, it will continue defeating hostile nations in the region. However, according to him, the restoration of “Arab dignity” in the region would bring peace.

In Finkelstein’s statement, there seems to be a link between so-called Arab dignity, authoritarianism and violence. The authoritarian regimes in the region seem to have normalized the use of violence in these societies, and this might be what Finkelstein is alluding to in his discussion of the problems with Arab dignity. Violence becomes justified as an intervention against a rebelling society, from both within and without. This violence is also more likely to be prevalent in societies that are not democratized. Democratization in the Arab Muslim world has faced several obstacles, including the illegitimacy of leadership after independence, the prevalent absence of just and fair elections and the failed attempt to import and adopt a Western democratic model “key-in-hand” without adapting the model to the local cultural background (Legrand and Khader, 1998).

As a reference for artistic representations of the theme of Arab identity and *karama* right after the 2011 Uprisings in Egypt, it is important to highlight the hip hop group Arabian Knightz, who marked the revolutionary music genre in relation to the Arab Uprising events. The group’s founding predates the 2011 revolution. After its members were censored and jailed under Mubarak, the group naturally became one of the voices of the Egyptian youth in the 2011 revolution. Twenty-nine music artists from the region and one from Armenia participated in their song “Uknighthed State of Arabia” (2012). The melodies they use blend hip hop with Raï and rap. The lyrics are in English, French and a variety of Arabic dialects and accents. The following are some excerpts from the song in

⁶ Osman El Sharnoubi, “Finkelstein: Arab Dignity Will Bring Peace to the Middle East,” *Ahram Online*, May 18, 2011. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/12312/World/Region/Norman-Finkelstein-Arab-dignity-will-bring-peace-t.aspx>.

its original version and an English translation, as well as commentaries when necessary:⁷

- "revolution with unity." It could relate to Arab unity.
- "*Tarja' ayam al 'az.*" It could be translated from the Moroccan dialect as "the days of respect and dignity will come back." It could relate to the expectations for the return of a golden age of the Arab Muslim world.
- "*Al karama taj foug arrass.*" Meaning in Moroccan dialect: "Dignity is a crown over one's head." A reference to the importance of karama.
- "*Min ghir huwiyya.*" Meaning in Egyptian dialect: "without identity." It could reference an identity crisis.
- "The world is blind to the things I have seen." It could reference the violence and injustices in the region, particularly in Palestine (a recurrent theme for the Palestinian artist Hanounch's music).
- "Guantanamo." A reference to the collateral damages of the War on Terror launched by former U.S. president George W. Bush.
- "*Ifrahi ya umu shahid wa ihtifi ahhlā nashid; lam yamoot man mata lilah.*" Meaning in classical Arabic: "be happy, mother of the one who died as a *shahid* and sing the best song because who died for God did not die." *Shahid*, in Islam, refers to the martyr who dies in an act of Jihad and goes, therefore, directly to heaven. This reference is a way to honor the martyrs of the revolutions. Moreover, the use of the footage of the Muhammad al-Durrah incident in the music clip is a way to emphasize the death toll in Gaza. In this incident, which happened in 2000 and during the second Palestinian *Intifida*, a cameraman filmed the death of Muhammad. In the footage, Muhammad was seen with his father hiding behind a concrete cylinder before they were both shot.
- "Proud of our heritage . . . we ruled for eight centuries . . . and eventually, we will be infinity." In reference to the Golden Age of the Arab Muslim region.
- "*Ddid al ihtilal . . . ddid al 'onsoriyya . . . ddid al hissar.*" Meaning in Shami dialect with Lebanese accent: "against occupation . . . against racism . . . against blockade."
- "*Karamat al 'arab ma da'at fil gharb . . . marad nafsy.*" Meaning in Iraqi accent: "the dignity of the Arabs was not lost in the West . . . a psychological

⁷ I have contacted members of the group Arabian Knightz to provide some translations.

illness." Perhaps a reference to an Arab identity crisis in relation with colonialism.

- "*Trop barbus*." Meaning "too bearded." A reference to increasing Islamic radicalization.
- "Proud muslim"; "*dini, muslim, mu'min*." Meaning in Arabic with Saudi accent: "religious, Muslim and believer."
- "*Lazem t'ich bi karamtek fiha*." Meaning in Algerian accent: "you must live with your dignity in it," with "it" referring to life.
- "*Farabi*," "*Ibn Sina*," "*zay ayam al hadara*." Referring to notable Muslim thinkers (who, in these examples, are not ethnically Arabs) and meaning in Egyptian dialect: "like the days of the civilization." Another reference to the Golden Age of the Muslim region, but in a song about uniting Arabs.
- "Hip hop ain't dead, it's still alive; it moved to the Middle East where the struggle is still alive."

This Arabian Knightz song has four main recurring themes: (1) Arab unity, (2) nostalgia for the past versus disenchantment with the present, in addition to identity loss, (3) dignity's importance and (4) violence as related to the Palestinian cause, which also relates to the global economic precarity struggle, and increasing Islamophobia. The song can also be contrasted to the (in)famous popular song *Souriya Habibati* that centers Arab identity on the strength of *karama*/dignity. In an exchange about the song *Souriya Habibati* with political economist and dear friend Omar Dahi, who grew up in Syria listening to the song as a major nationalist song, on the one hand, it seems that there is disenchantment with the song because it is associated with the Assad regime. On the other hand, Lebanese public figure Rafic Nasrallah, in his 2017 book, referred to the song as an important milestone for dignity demands in the Arab world.

INTERVIEWS

During the interviews, the economic theme was often associated with the problems of Arab nations. Diaa is in her forties, and she is a member of the Al Karama party. She works as an accountant in an insurance company not far from the Maspero building (the

headquarters of the state-run Egyptian Radio and Television Union and a main target in the 2011 Egyptian uprisings). She is a particular fan of Hamdeen Sabahi, who founded the Al Karama party and ran for presidential elections against El Sisi in 2014. For her, Arab identity is at the center of the Egyptians' *karama*. When I asked her if there is a problem with the Arab identity, she quickly retorted that the problem is evident and the situation is bad not only for Egypt, but also for my country of Morocco. Diaa explained that these identity issues are related to the ongoing economic occupation ("*ihtilal iqtisadi*"). The signifiers that Diaa used often echoed with the Nasserite jargon regarding an economy that ought to break free from the shackles of colonization. She also delved in the history of Third Worldism, in which Nasser played a major role to fight imperialism, according to her. When I asked her if he was successful, her expression turned seemingly a bit upset, and she added that "they," the foreigners, did not allow him to succeed.

Osman was twenty-four years old at the time of the interview in December 2013. He was a graduate student in public administration and worked in public finance. Osman advanced that he had no sympathy for Nasser because he destroyed the country ("*kharab el balad*"). Osman was very interested to know more about my experience as a young Arab woman in all the foreign countries I had been to. He added that the people of the Maghreb seem to be very liberal and that they let their women travel broadly, which revealed a particularly patriarchal view of women. He even added that he lived for a short period of time in France and was hosted by an Algerian woman living with (and not married to) a French man. Osman admitted that he was very puzzled with the lady's "strange" behavior and "wicked" mores. When I asked him about Arab identity, his expression turned thoughtful, and he said, "We the Arab people do not have dignity, I am telling you." Osman included me in this statement since he accepted my "Arabness."

During the interviews, many participants claimed that being Egyptian was in some way special in relation to other Arab identities. "Egyptian-ness" seems to be a particular shade of Arabness, and this



FIGURE 2.1 Representations of Nasser and his quote, “the people are the leader and the teacher,” in the vicinity of Tahrir Square in Cairo, taken around July/August 2013, by Filippo Dionigi, lecturer in politics and international relations at the University of Bristol.

Egyptian exceptionalism is also boasted of in the many Egyptian movies, images, video clips, stencils, banners and art forms, both before the revolution and also at the time of the uprisings in 2011. Even now, current president El Sisi profusely uses slogans claiming that Egyptians are “exceptional” in his presidential speeches. Several media sources, moreover, compare El Sisi’s ultra-nationalist style to that of Nasser.

Nasser’s persona was often perceived in the interviews as the element reinforcing and revaluing Egyptian national identity and *karama*. The revolution space in 2011 hosted many photos and stencil graffiti of Nasser (see [Figure 2.1](#)) even by the Ultras, who were a force of opposition to the power in Egypt even before the Arab Uprisings (Dorsey, 2012).

One pragmatic dimension of using the image of Nasser was to reinforce regional solidarity of the North Africa and Middle East

region. It is important here to distinguish between a call for solidarity as opposed to one for unity (which was apparent in the interviews). The calls for *qawmiyya* (meaning “nationalism”) and *muwatana* (meaning “civism”) intended to bring about international solidarity in the region that could also be expressed in notions such as *qotriyya* (meaning “cooperation”). This solidarity is particularly useful against forms of neocolonialism (foreign and internal) that target the distressed local economies and forms of social humiliation, such as the concept of *hogra* in the Maghrebi context.

The *hogra* in Egypt was evidently profound. One of the causes of the wounds of humiliation in Egypt was Nasser’s 1967 War that turned into a defeat. Jesse Ferris, in his book *Nasser’s Gamble*, examined how Nasser’s intervention in Yemen wrongly boosted his confidence in Egypt’s military powers and caused the war with Israel in 1967 (2012; Orkaby, 2017). According to Ferris, this defeat was the starting point of the decline of hope in the ambitions of political and economic development for Egypt.

In the context of the political arena after Nasser, the neo-Nasserite party of Al Karama, or the Dignity Party, was a useful discovery in terms of finding a resilient pro-Nasser discourse despite all of the former leader’s blatant strategic and military faux pas. A Weberian review of the party, based on Max Weber’s theory of what a party is, shows that the discussion of politics ought to be one of analytical distinctions between “Class, Status and Party” (Bruun, 1972). In the case of the Al Karama party, the element of class struggle is challenged, as most of the members of the party often benefit from the neoliberal and capitalist system, despite rebutting this system’s ideology. Nasserite activists in Egypt also grew to become associated with a privileged and elitist class, which contradicts the group’s socialist and anti-imperialist ambitions.

Al Karama is also the name of a Swiss-based international non-governmental human rights organization, which promotes human rights in the Arab region (not linked to the Egyptian party). The organization has a regional bureau in Egypt. Nadia, who is from

Alexandria, interned at Al Karama in both Egypt and Switzerland for several months before moving permanently to Cairo. Nadia holds a master's in human rights from a prestigious university in the United Kingdom, and she believed that the NGO, Al Karama, did not provide her with a satisfying experience. She felt privileged in Switzerland and far from the real struggles of the Egyptian people on the ground. Similar to the case of the Dignity Party, the NGO Al Karama also suffers from credibility issues concerning its core cause due to the perceived privileges its location and elitist staff represent, according to Nadia.

Waleed, the youngest interviewee in this study, was a nineteen-year-old high school student during the 2011 protests. For him, Arab identity was central to the Egyptian society during the uprisings, but even before that as well. However, he noted that the revolutionary event also brought about a new Arab consciousness (*"wa'y arabi gadid"*). This was manifested, according to him, through the attention paid by Egyptian protesters to what was happening in Tunisia, Soudan, and Syria. Waleed cautioned, however, that one should not think this attention should be "romanticized" in an old way because it was more for pragmatic reasons to gauge potential influences from these other countries of the Arab Uprisings. Conversely, Waleed recalled some "strange" utterances by some protesting groups calling for the abolition of borders in the Arab world (*"taqa' al hudud"*). This showed that he had difficulty conceiving of a redrawing of the borders, particularly considering the more established idea of a nation-state in the Arab world.

Waleed also advanced that the rise of the Islamists right after the first protests in 2011 toned down this new Arab consciousness to concentrate more on strictly national concerns. Despite his admiration for this new Arab consciousness at the beginning of the protests in 2011, Waleed stressed that he had a problem with this so-called Arab identity. He finds it to be senseless. For him, every country has their characteristics and constraints, and even in one country – like Egypt – each generation has been brought up by different leaders who

impacted one's allegiance to an Arab unity. Waleed's father, for instance, was brought up under Nasser (while he was brought up under Mubarak), and Waleed suggested that his father's views on Arab identity are, for instance, at polar opposites to his own views; Waleed does not see a need for Arabism and rather thinks that identities are personal matters.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter focused on combining understandings of dignity with nationalism. With such a combination, chanting the dignity of a nation can come at the price of individual liberties if these liberties are not aligned with the nation's demands. For instance, an individual can choose to adhere to a particular ideology, but if her ideology is deemed by the state to be a threat to that very state and is therefore banned, the ideological adherence of such an individual can ostracize her in her state in many different ways. It seems, therefore, that problems of identity crisis may also be the consequence of a confused understanding of dignity.

Another problem related to Islam and identity concerns political Islam and its dynamics in societies like Egypt. Evidence from the scholarly literature suggests that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, was marginalized from the political scene due to their feeble stance on Egyptian nationality (Osman, 2010). However, one of the interviewed individuals suggested that in the recent uprisings in 2011, it was the Brotherhood who caused the pan-Arabist consciousness of the protesters to focus more on national consciousness, which seems to contradict the interpretation of political analyst Tarek Osman. In addition, Islam seems to galvanize a more coherent sense of both national and regional identity, not as a religious attribute but as a political one. Moreover, there is ambivalence in the expectations of Islam as it is both considered the hope for Arab economies and politics, and, at the same time, the very sickness in these societies. Expectations in these Arab societies might, hence, be a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed, as revealed from the interviews.

Regardless of the specificities of the political systems of Arab states, the Arab Uprisings provided an opportunity to reflect on several themes that unite the region, and identity is one of them. This is not to say that identity is monolithic in the region (nor is it anywhere else), but the idea here is to explore the claim of a “common” identity under the Arab signifier (the Arab League being maybe the obvious formalization of this claim). The issues of Arab unity are also important to consider in this study of Egypt in 2011, as unity remains an unaccomplished project. Political scientist Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, in this regard, stresses that a main feature of this project of unity was to promote sound economic development to enable Arab countries’ independence from great powers (Hudson, 1999). The attractiveness of this promise should not be neglected in the context of many societies of the Global South, like Egypt, with a colonial past and a present dependence on foreign aid institutions.

A discussion of identity also brings to mind a reflection on passions and their impact on politicizing people and concepts such as dignity.⁸ These passionate debates can also lead to the question of which enemy is being fought. In the case of Egypt, it seems that, similar to the multiplicity of the meanings of *karama*, the enemy takes on many faces (including an internal “colonizing” regime, not necessarily foreign any longer). It is even more interesting to see that the local regime was presented as an internal colonizer. For instance, one of the jokes by the protesters was to state that the Egyptian national anthem had been changed from, “My country, my country, my country” (*bilady, bilady, bilady*), to, “His country, his country,

⁸ During my presentation at the Center for the Study of Conflicts and International Relations (CECRI), my discussant, Professor Dr. Valérie Rosoux, suggested I explore the theme of passion during the Arab Uprisings events, citing the works of Raymond Aron and Pierre Hassner (*La Revanche des passions: métamorphoses de la violence et crises du politique* [Fayard, 2015]), as well as an insightful quote by Stanley Hoffman: “Il faudrait pouvoir marquer sur la carte les passions comme les bases militaires ou les puits de pétroles” [We ought to locate sites of passion on maps the same way we locate military bases or oil wells].

his country ... Egypt is to Hosni and his sons" (*bilado, bilado, bilado ... misr li Hosni we wlado*).

People's passions can also fall as an easy prey to populist discourses that have little tolerance for opposition, as can be seen in the case of Egypt after the ousting of Mubarak. The nationalist dimension of *karama* is related to a material notion of lost heritage. In this sense, the feelings of material loss could be related to the feelings of nostalgia for the Golden Age of the Arab and Islamic empire and the endurance of feelings of an Arab identity crisis. These revealed feelings of loss, particularly losing control of one's identity and a consequential confusion regarding one's dignity, support this book's central claim concerning a particular and cultural understanding of *karama*.

The [next chapter](#) deals with a more institutionalized understanding of dignity, as seen with several constitutional documents that relate human dignity to human rights, including the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Dignity as a construction of identity benefits from the legal claims attached to identifying dignity as a human right, which we will see in the [coming chapter](#).

3 Dignity as a Human Right[★]

When dealing with the concept of karama in the interviews, the discussion of human rights was often brief and limited to confirming that karama is an obvious human right. In addition, the theme of karama as a human right was seldom initiated by the interviewees (in only four out of thirty cases was the topic brought up by one of them), and so I was the one who brought it into the discussion. The themes of identity and materiality seemed more important, perhaps due to the fact that they are easier to think about compared to the more complex institutionalizing of human rights. For this theme, an essential question rests on whether karama is intrinsic or extrinsic. This leads to whether dignity should be considered intrinsic to human nature or, rather, a universal human right to be earned. Here we see a possible difference between a cultural, vernacular understanding of dignity versus a foreign, imported one. The cultural nature of this study leads to a focus on investigating the dynamics of vernacular modernity, that is, modern politics appropriated by an indigenous culture. This cultural approach to the study of postcolonial politics, in the case of the karama discourse in the 2011 Arab Uprisings in Egypt, can deepen our understanding of classical theoretical debates, such as the right to dignity, that are a matter of concern in our societies.

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This chapter begins with a brief general review of a few relevant philosophical debates about human dignity and human rights that are concerned with societal progress in the way *karama* as a human right was sometimes interpreted by the Arab Uprisings protesters. Then, we move on to a closer look at a postcolonial review of similar debates. After reviewing some relevant passages from interviews and other expressions of *karama* as a human right in Egypt, the chapter ends with an overall analysis of this specific theme in light of the material previously presented.

BACKGROUND

To discuss the concept of dignity in the framework of human rights, it is helpful to start with a philosophical investigation because the concept prompts questions about the essence of what makes human beings who they are. In what follows, I attempt to review a narrow portion of a very wide literature that deals with the concept of dignity (or closer concepts) as a right and quality of human beings. It is important to recognize here the invocation of human rights in relation to state existence (rights as a responsibility of states), in relation to socioeconomic development within states, and in relation to structural change (meaning triggering revolutions in societies that alter social order and/or political regimes).

In more ancient philosophical studies concerning dignity, the works of Cicero and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (who was cited in an interview for his work on Islam) established a universal nature of dignity that considers all human beings to be equal (including slaves). Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau did not talk directly about dignity, but he did discuss an *amour-propre* (meaning “self-love,” or “*hob khas*” in Arabic) and an *amour de soi* (meaning “love of self,” or “*hob adhat*”¹). An interesting contrast can be seen in the early

¹ This translation is based on the work of philosopher Abdelaziz Labib who translated Rousseau’s *Social Contract* into Arabic. Another translation for *amour-propre* is “self-respect,” which corresponds to “*ihtram al-nafs*” in Arabic.

twentieth-century philosopher William James' work on self-esteem, in which he views it as tied to the pretensions of success, which is more consistent with a materialist dimension of one's worth (1890). Rousseau stated that the two concepts are different and should not be confused with the meaning of ego, which has a negative connotation. For Rousseau, the *amour de soi* can be dangerous as it could inflate ego. Conversely, the *amour-propre* that he associated with *dignité* ("dignity") was positive and desirable because individuals needed to love themselves in order to thrive in their societies. In this context, Rousseau's practical definition of dignity stressed that individuals who are conscious of their worth can be more productive than those who are not.

Rousseau's logic is present in the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This important international charter asserted the importance of equality and dignity in its first article, which in its translated form refers precisely to *karama* and thus adds different cultural understandings beyond the meaning put forth in the charter. With the establishment of the nation-state model for peaceful and prosperous societies after World War II, contemporary philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, reflected on the dignity paradigm by exploring democratic processes as human rights affirmations in prosperous societies. Habermas analyzed the importance of group action to allow for both democracy and human rights establishments, and Rawls discussed the need to visualize oneself in all parts of the social order in order to effectively establish said democracy and human rights (Rawls, 1971, 2005; Habermas, 1985). Both authors seemed to overlook the socioeconomic context that could allow individuals to properly engage in democratic processes even if they are entitled to human rights.

Seyla Benhabib,² a Turkish-American philosopher, was inspired by the work of Habermas and attempted to cover his dismissal of

² Seyla Benhabib also traces her origins to the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Spain, as explained in the interview on UCTV for the Institute of International Studies at the

specific socioeconomic contexts. She particularly used Habermas' work in critical and feminist approaches. Her book *Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times* (2011) is a case in point for a dilemma between the ideals of the modern neoliberal development model and the reality of inequalities and social distress in most contemporary societies. According to Benhabib, modern societies are struggling with the duplicity of cosmopolitanism (in the sense that there is a mismatch between the universal claim of human rights and its restrictions depending on race, geographies, gender, or socioeconomic classes), which triggers people's need to have their dignity recognized (Serbaji, 2016).

Despite the existence of an international charter on human rights (that includes human dignity), there is a lack of concrete, systematic and unified enforcement of the charter as the sovereignty of states usually trumps that of international governing bodies (despite the fact that the charter consists of a peremptory norm in international law, or *jus cogens*). As a result, a number of countries wrote or amended their constitutions to allow for more provisions on human rights protections in line with the international charter. Ernst Bloch, one of the founders of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, made an important contribution to this theme of the legality of human rights. In his book *Natural Law and Human Dignity* (1961), he used the idea of natural law to argue that revolutions and rights, rather than being antagonistic, were fundamentally interdependent. For Bloch, the traditions of natural law have made an irreplaceable contribution to the socialist vision of a more humane society, thanks to their focus on human dignity. Bloch was motivated by the agenda of social revolutions, yet he skillfully integrated the demands of law in modern societies to suggest a radical restructuring of the social world by protecting individuals' dignity regardless of their economic status.

In a similar vein to Bloch, Axel Honneth, a Habermasian philosopher, determined three phases of the struggle for recognition to provide a concrete platform for the legality of human dignity (1995). The first phase corresponds to the demand for love to comfort one's basic senses and needs. This demand helps to create the basis for an individual's self-confidence. The second phase corresponds to the demand for rights in order to both recognize one's rights and acknowledge others' similar rights. This phase creates the basis for self-respect. Finally, the third phase concerns the demand for recognition as a unique and dignified person, which, for Honneth, presents the basis for self-esteem and dignity.

Philosopher and political scientist Nancy Fraser warned, however, about the utilization of discourses on struggles for recognition, merged with propaganda for identity politics, to claim a dignity need (1997). Indeed, some collective demands, coming from specific ethnic groups, might support separatism and intolerance toward other socio-cultural groups, rather than foster acceptance for ethnic differences. For Fraser, this reality about collective demands can lead to promoting oppressive forms of communitarianism and exacerbating both economic injustice and social inequalities.³ Fraser does not suggest simply rejecting politics of recognition in order to protect human dignity, because that could undermine the struggle of millions of people, whose salvation from grave injustices depends on recognition of some kind. Instead, she suggests using an alternative to politics of recognition by promoting "non-identitarian" politics (meaning not focused on discursive construction of group identity) that are socio-culturally and ethnically blind.

Presenting human dignity as part of the human rights framework strengthens the interdependent relation between individuals and states. It is in the interest of states to recognize the worth of individuals so that they are empowered actors in the development of

³ *Humiliation Studies Group*, 2015. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3 (2000): 107–120.

these states. However, with the prevalence of neoliberal economic development models in which income inequality is often inherent to profit maximization, the state is faced with a dilemma: continue its recognition of the centrality of human rights and jeopardize the optimal expansion of a capitalist economic model or sacrifice capitalist development to stay faithful to its need to empower all its citizens equally. The current neoliberal economic context, with its disproportionate measure toward different stakeholders, seems to jeopardize respect for human rights and human dignity, yet the protection of human rights is vital to well-functioning democracies despite economic adversity (this being a utilitarian approach to human rights that conflicts with their intrinsic and unconditional character).

Pope Francis has, since his appointment in 2013, championed a discourse of the dignity of work that has been picked up by world leaders from former US president Barack Obama to current Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro. Philosopher Michael Sandel in his recent book on the tyranny of meritocracy has much engaged with the need to rehabilitate the importance of the dignity of work over the harsh ethics of success that fuel a system of meritocracy and that jeopardize civic sentiments (2020). In many of today's hyper-neoliberal economic contexts, including in Egypt, the shrinking of the state's control over the economy has limited a socialized management of resources, which not only alienates workers, but also exacerbates the differential between a reality of precarity of many citizens versus expectations on equality of human rights and the value of human life. This differential can lead to abandoning one's trust in state institutions, which in turn weakens them. Indeed, the state's retreat from its social welfare responsibilities left a vacuum that cannot be filled by profit-seeking capitalist actors, but also this retreat diminished the sense of public common good that enlivens the community life in the state. Instead, the prevalence of meritocratic systems in increasingly capitalistic economies makes those who fail to succeed, because they did not go to college and did not get salaries in which they earn much more than the median earners, relative

failures who feel humiliated (Sandel, 2020). An alternative to this merit layout, in which inequalities deepen, is a system that upholds equal dignities and supports the dignity of all work. Such a system supports more the institutionalization of human rights and a needed ethic of living together in which everyone's contribution to the common good is duly valued. A dignocracy!

A POSTCOLONIAL SETTING

The independence process in colonized territories of the twentieth century was a claim for full rights of the natives. As globalist Diana Brydon puts it, the history of postcolonialism is first the history of human rights.⁴ While this holistic claim can be contended, it is important to note the centrality of demands for human rights in formerly colonized societies since the process of human discrimination was deepened by foreign occupation and became two-dimensional, from within and from without. Because of the crucial question of human rights in violence-ridden postcolonial societies, many scholars in postcolonial studies have dealt with this question and expressed an overall concern with the failure of the human rights discourse in these societies. First, these failures are sometimes credited to the historical silences that subordinated the human rights struggles in societies of the Global South. As a result, some scholars suggest getting these historical accounts not only from history texts but also from narratives. On the other hand, an alternative worth exploring is questioning whether this silencing of human rights discourse in postcolonial societies has strengthened the demand for human rights.

Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot shed light on an important process of subverting the past as a mechanism of epistemic violence against a population: the dispensing of people's histories as an act of violence. In his book *Silencing the Past* (1995), Trouillot presented the

⁴ Diana Brydon's lecture on "Postcolonial and Global Approaches to Human Rights," delivered at the University of Manitoba, September 1, 2012.

case of the Haitian revolution as a “non-event,” meaning a historical moment that did not get recognized as a historical event. However, the slaves’ successful revolution against their masters in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) from 1791 to 1804 was very symbolic in their claim of human rights. This giant event in the history of humanity was dismissed from major historical accounts of the rise of human rights. Conversely, one can see that there was an interest in sweeping such a giant event under the rug when the slave trade was still profitable and necessary for capitalist expansion.

The question of the legality of equal rights for all individuals was therefore clearly at stake in the process of modern capitalist expansion. Joseph Slaughter proposed that “the gap between what everyone knows and what everyone should know poses human rights as a question of both literacy and legislation, as much matters of literature as of law” (2009, p. 3). Slaughter was among those, in post-colonial studies, who led the trend to explore narratives in dealing with the question of human rights in societies of the Global South (2009). Yet, it is important in such a critique to be aware of pitfalls of victimizing and opposing the “them” to the “us.” This binary is even more challenged in the context of hybridization in globalization, in which one sees increasing feelings of transnationalism and supranationalism that unify people and movements beyond borders (Scholte, 2005). In his call for a more humane global society, Jan Scholte proposes to “subordinate all transplanetary governance to human rights standards” and calls for developing “a legally binding and enforced transplanetary bill of rights” (2005, p. 396).

In the absence of such an ambitious plan as that proposed by Scholte, other critical scholars preferred to go back to history to evaluate the failures of the human rights discourse in societies of the Global South instead of projecting a plan for the future. One issue revealed is a tendency of human rights movements in postcolonial societies to target only local repression and dismiss connections with external hegemonic powers. The case of Myanmar with the struggle of activist Aung San Suu Kyi for human rights and democracy is an

alternative and to some extent a model for postcolonial human rights action. The parallel between the local and the global was made because she showed that the British colonial rule gave shape to the human rights institutions of postcolonial Myanmar (Chowdhry and Nair, 2002). Critical theorist Sheila Nair, who looked at the Burmese model in her chapter "Human Rights and Postcoloniality: Representing Burma," also noted that, in the field's literature, there is "a neglect of the impact of economic globalization on the creation and maintenance of an effective human rights framework" (Chowdhry and Nair, 2002, p. 257).

Pheng Cheah's work filled the gaps created by this neglect to deal with the impact of the neoliberal development model on postcolonial societies. In *Inhuman Conditions*, Cheah shows that individuals are shaped by their specific context that challenges the ambition of new cosmopolitanism, as proposed by Scholte, of operating communally under intergovernmental institutions (2006). Cheah adds that since global capitalism is the context for most people, capitalist globalization is thence the context for human rights in the battle between the human and the inhuman for the sake of money and power (2006). This critique is important to stress the centrality of economic inequalities inherent in the capitalist model that do not only concern actors within a market but also communities and states within an integrated world economy.

In *Fictions of Dignity* (2012), critical theorist Elizabeth Anker asserts the need to look at narratives to understand the question of human rights in societies of the Global South. Anker enumerates several novels that represent such narratives, among them *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) by Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi. Anker explains that the fiction of human dignity and bodily restrictions enforced by modern legal structures create an anxiety with human rights discourse in the Global South, as seen with the case of feminism in Egypt in El Saadawi's novel, for instance (2012).

Partha Chatterjee's message concerning postcolonial societies of rights is, by contrast, somewhat hopeful because he suggests that

economic adversity might present opportunities for democratization. When postcolonialist Gayatri Spivak famously asked, “[Can] the subaltern speak?” (1988/1994), Chatterjee’s work on political society (2011) seems to retort that, in some way, the subaltern has found subversive ways to be empowered by creating democratic processes for a society of rights. This postcolonial society, as defined by Chatterjee, is opposed to a civil society and operates outside a political system to influence the regime. This political society is like a fringe society that does not use civism but rather bargains for its survival outside of the legal space of state actions (for instance, through bribery or state tolerance even of illegality – as with squatting). One might wonder if insistence and bargain are sufficient for the subaltern to “speak,” but it could be, at least, a step forward in giving her a voice. Nonetheless, one should remember that postcolonial societies inherited a system of “free use of violence” in which this bargaining can be cut short due to oppressive postcolonial regimes that brutalize individuals’ rights and liberties (Crowder, 1984; Bayart, 1993; Mamdani, 1996).

In addition, Chatterjee’s suggestion concerning the divide between two societies in postcolonial India finds similarities with postcolonial Egypt, where political action is often received as an attack on the state apparatus, instead of a legitimate and needed mechanism for a healthy polity. Comparative political scientists Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson investigated the problems of democracy in Arab societies and refuted that it was *not* caused by the dominance of Islam in these societies, since other Muslim societies in South East Asia performed better in democracy indicators (2003). It was, therefore, the peculiarity of the Arab context and the problem with the local identity that seemed better leads in Stepan and Robertson’s study on democratic problems in the region.

Postcolonial literature has repeatedly pointed to issues of human rights discourses in the Global South, but if we take into account the dynamic nature of societies molding themselves according to changing needs, it seems that alternative spaces can present ways for systems of

rights to operate in these societies. In the case of Egypt, human rights have been an ongoing concern since the birth of the new postcolonial state. The regional context is also similar in this concern. Several forces challenge Egypt's and Egyptians' multiple identities. This could in turn challenge the cohesiveness of claims of identity in Egypt, particularly as such claims can be challenged by the resounding demand for universality of human rights, which again shows the more inclusive nature of dignity politics over identity politics.

EXPRESSIONS OF KARAMA AS A HUMAN RIGHT

In the case of human rights in Egypt, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a human rights activist and academic, has been vocal about democracy, and his virulent criticism toward Mubarak's government cost him several legal trials. In 2003, he was acquitted after being condemned for "undermining the dignity of the state and tarnishing its reputation."⁵ This highlights an interesting case of endowing a non-human entity, such as the state, with a seemingly human characteristic, such as dignity. Ibrahim stressed the need to respect human rights in Egypt. For him, protection of human rights is vital for a genuine democratic establishment. Ibrahim has also called the US Congress to condition its military aid to Egypt on improvements in the country's human rights records. Moreover, he called for the conditioning of US aid on freeing civilian political prisoners who were tried in military courts under martial law during Mubarak's regime.

It is important to note that human rights activism in Egypt aims to attain legislative reform to establish institutions and laws for the protection of human rights and to fight corrupted structures and mechanisms that facilitate the mistreatment of citizens by the state. For instance, a major concern in this reformatory movement aims to distinguish between the dignity of the state and the dignity of the individual. Indeed, the 1971 Egyptian Constitution, which was

⁵ "Egyptian Sociologist Ibrahim Is Acquitted," *American Sociological Association*, April 2003.

amended in 2007, in the most recent case before the uprisings, declared: "Man's dignity is a natural reflection of the nation's dignity, now that the individual is the cornerstone in the edifice of the homeland, the land that derives its strength and prestige from the value of man and his education" (Proclamation, Section Four). This article could be seen as problematic because relating national dignity to individual dignity undermines the concept of human dignity as self-worth and as an independent notion from any form of national consideration. Dignity also may become the state's "property," in which case an individual cannot embody her own dignity.

An important episode of human rights violations and the problematization of human dignity in contemporary Egypt can be seen in the case of the arrest of the fifty-two men caught in a floating gay nightclub called the Queen Boat on May 11, 2001, in Cairo. In this arrest, fifty men were charged with habitual debauchery and promiscuous behavior, as understood from Article 9(c) of the Law Number 10 of 1961 on the Combat of Prostitution.⁶ The other two men were charged with contempt of religion, under Article 98(f) of the Penal Code. All of the men pleaded innocent.⁷ The Queen Boat trial, also known as Cairo 52, presented a case in which the lack of clear condemnation for the activities in the gay nightclub led to the use of proxy condemnations that punish debauchery and obscenity and to infringements of human rights. At the time, many critics of the government denounced the media's political use of this trial to justify the state's arbitrariness in using proxy condemnations, instead of making efforts to address the case in more just manners.

Cairo 52 is a case of gay rights violation as stipulated by several international organizations for human rights; however, in countries where gay rights are not recognized, the case was perceived as a defensive circumstance for the state. In a completely different case, but also

⁶ "Egypt: Egyptian Justice on Trial – The Case of the Cairo 52," *OutRight Action International*, October 15, 2001.

⁷ *Ibid.*

one of proxy condemnations, we can see how these proxy condemnations that are used to protect what is seemingly morally correct could be an infringement of the rights of the individual. This happened in France in the Morsang-sur-Orge's dwarf-tossing contest in 1995. The local mayor prohibited the tossing contest in the name of protecting human dignity. The case began in 1991, because the banned contest was actually a lucrative activity for Mr. Manuel Wackenheim, a dwarf, who, wearing a protective suit, was tossed so that he landed on an airbed in a bar, providing what seemed to be an entertaining show for paying customers. Mr. Wackenheim took the case to court and asserted that he didn't feel that his dignity was assaulted because of dwarf-tossing and that it was the mayor's ban, which hurt his business, that was an assault on his dignity because the mayor's ban limited his right to take up the employment of his choice. After appealing at different levels of administrative courts, the concerned plaintiff reached the French Council of State, which acts both as a legal adviser to the executive branch and as the supreme court for administrative justice. Despite strong controversy about the judge's dismissal of the plaintiff's calls for the freedom of action and the freedom of expression, the mayor won the case and succeeded in prohibiting the contest in the name of human dignity (Rosen, 2012). This was an example of the ability of the state to actually bestow and enforce dignity, even if it acts against the protection of freedoms of action.

In this French case or in Cairo 52, it seems that protecting human morals by enforcing rights and laws may lead to overwhelming state intervention in an individual's social life, leading to a decreased agency. Therefore, we can imagine that the impact of the enforcement of such legislation on human dignity may even create feelings of assault on one's dignity, in the name of a communitarian sense of dignity that is safeguarded by the state.

In the early events of the Arab Uprisings, acts of self-immolation were poignant symbols of self-inflicted harm to denounce state humiliation. In the case of Egypt, one of the early revolutionary slogans was "Bread ... freedom ... human dignity." It is interesting

here to note the choice of the wording: “human dignity” (*karama insaniyya*) instead of simply “dignity.” One possibility could be that the use of “human” is related to the discourse of “human development” and “human rights,” so well above the dignity of one person. This relation makes sense to explain, to a certain extent, an incongruous choice of the meaningful saying “*karama insaniyya*” (human dignity) over simply “*karama*” (dignity), particularly in Arabic expression, which tends to favor the use of fewer words with precise meaning. Also, referring to the register of human rights in the slogan served the need to denounce state and institutional humiliation and torture, which were targeted by protesters in the Arab Uprisings.

A major figure of these uprisings in Egypt was Wael Ghonim, an Egypt-born, Dubai-based Google executive who created a Facebook page called “We Are All Khaled Saeed/Kullena Khaled Said” to denounce the brutal torture and killing of the young cyber activist, Khaled Saeed, by Egyptian police on June 6, 2010, due to his release of sensitive information on corruption cases in Egypt. The page was also managed by a young Egyptian journalist, Abdelrahman Mansour (Shenker, 2016, p. 202). Saeed’s killing had a more significant impact on larger segments of the Egyptian society because the young cyber activist was more of a mainstream citizen (rather than a marginal one). Sympathy for the case of Saeed and of Ghonim was, therefore, greater. Ghonim was imprisoned, but his gained popularity led to an important outcry against his arrest, which consequently led to his being set free. After being freed from jail, Ghonim’s first words included the need to restore the “*karama*” of all Egyptians.⁸

INTERVIEWS

Donya is a fifty-seven-year-old Arabic instructor who recently moved to the southeastern United States. She had left Cairo for a position at a prestigious university because she did not feel safe in her own

⁸ Alexia Tsotsis, “Wael Ghonim’s First Interview after Jail Release,” *The Crunch*, February 7, 2011.

country. Donya's husband, a journalist, had been fired from his job. According to Donya, her husband's condemnation of the August 2013 Rabaa killings in which Egyptian forces clashed with pro-Morsi supporters cost him his job. Donya has one daughter who is living in Western Europe and produces documentary films. Donya's daughter had strongly supported her parents' emigration from Egypt. Donya was very emotional in her retelling of the 2011 events.

For Donya, many people died in vain in the 2011 uprisings. She also added that the Egyptian people were treated "*zay el kilab*" (meaning "like dogs") and that no human being deserves to be treated like that. I asked her to give me some examples of these treatments, and she gave the example of innocent men being slapped in the face in public and in broad daylight by police officers.

From all the interviews I conducted, all the respondents, including the one respondent rejecting the concept of *karama* as anything meaningful, agreed that *karama* is a fundamental human right of the individual. Moreover, on several occasions, the link between *karama* and both democracy and freedom was stressed. For instance, Adel, who was twenty-three years old and had moved to Italy in 2015 to study music, asserted that universalism is missing in Muslim societies because of the religious nature of their legal systems. According to Adel, universal values and secularism must be enforced in Egypt to put everyone on an equal footing. In the case of Adel, the language he used did not seem reflexive. On the contrary, Adel's strong stance on secularism was brought up in the discussions of all other themes of *karama*. Even national identity was, for him, problematic, as Egypt has communities of immigrants that need to be recognized and integrated into the local society and his solution was again secularism.

ARTICULATING A PROBLEM OF DIGNITY AS A HUMAN RIGHT

The institutionalization of human rights in declarations and in constitutional documents represents an important gain for modern societies to establish protections of individuals. However, it is evident that the

reality is often far from the ideal since there are violations of rights and also disagreements on framing what needs to be protected for humans (their bodies, their spiritual identifications, etc.). Some of the demands for protection of what is human and worthy of dignity can be associated with demands for food, for rights to marriage, or for democracy. This leaves an unanswered question (and maybe unanswerable) of whether dignity is inherent or extrinsic to human beings (or both) and then, whether it makes sense to frame dignity as a human right. In the interviews, this confusion seemed to arise because most respondents consider *karama* a human right but claimed that there are other priorities to attaining *karama*.

The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Egypt ratified, has been an instrument to monitor peace in societies and use human dignity as a foundation for those rights (Ishay, 2008; Lawer, 2009). Indeed, dignity is part of the larger institutionalization of human rights, an important gain in the history of humanity that provided a framework for more equality between different ethnic factions. However, is dignity a clearly protected right? On the one hand, it depends on the country: laws may not always protect dignity. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and freedom to petition for redress of grievances, are, on the other hand, cases of rights that an individual can expect protection from governmental intrusion in a more outright manner. Some of the people interviewed perceived dignity as something that an individual earns through hard work and accomplishment, assuming of course the government does not get in the way. Hence, protecting such dignity could be achieved if the right to pursue dignity is protected and not only a right to dignity itself. However, many post-independence regimes in the Middle East and North Africa do not seem to prioritize human rights protection and they use discourses of dignity without treating people with dignity.⁹ Indeed, in such regimes, there is a

⁹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2014: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

dichotomy between a political discourse that promises to protect dignity and accounts of human rights violations that are not addressed.¹⁰ It seems that these political discourses of dignity focus more on urgent needs of recognition or just plain old demagoguery to shift blame for governance issues onto external enemies. Those so-called external enemies are not necessarily foreign in nature, as they could be internal threats, as with the government opposition. When shifting the blame, it becomes nearly impossible to ensure an environment in which people are treated with dignity.

The concept of human dignity is engrained in philosophies of human rights. However, the abstract natures of human rights philosophies seem to block the acceptance of a convincing understanding of human dignity. Most detractors of the concept of dignity claim that it is nothing but a catchphrase. Charles Beitz examined this lack of “texture” in the human dignity discourse (2013) and proposed to formalize human dignity with the concrete structure of bioethics. Beitz noted that the current human rights discourse bases all human rights (civil, economic, social and political) on the principle of recognizing human dignity.¹¹ This framework is particularly present in the case of the German Constitution in which dignity is the source of all rights. To Beitz, such statements undermine a clear and independent understanding of human dignity. He proposes to frame human dignity with the rights derived from bioethical considerations. In this way, human dignity would be determined by specific cultural conditions that concern bioethical considerations of different religious and ethnic groups as well as sexual minorities.

The modern universalist claim in human rights’ discourses was often undermined by the reality of economic development led by an elite in power, which is the case in societies such as Egypt. The

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ The Helsinki Act of 1975, an act that marked the success of peace discussions during the Cold War, is an example in which it was agreed that human dignity predetermined all human rights.

theme of *karama* as a human right is consequently problematic in a context of significant economic inequalities between states and within states, which could prompt us to look for something more “basic” than *karama*/dignity as a human right and more in line with dignity as a need for survival and recognition first. In this sense, using *karama* as a claim to human rights is more opportunistic, to adhere to a project of Universalism, than being genuinely interested in promoting the respect and protection of human rights. But despite the apparent disillusionment with human rights protections in societies of the Global South, the relative cases of success in the struggle for rights by globally marginalized groups (such as LGBTQ+ communities) encourage a strategic political use of human rights and human dignity as bargaining processes for empowerment.

Since the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage, the general opinion celebrated the recognition of the dignity of all people and particularly their dignity in their sexual orientation. However, Justice Clarence Thomas advanced that there is a misunderstanding, in the United States, of human dignity as a constitutional right when, in reality, there is not a single mention of dignity in the US Constitution. Justice Thomas added that, even without a constitutional dignity, people should not feel that they are in a reduced mode of being. Justice Thomas also said, “Slaves did not lose their dignity (any more than they lost their humanity) because the government allowed them to be enslaved.”¹²

For Justice Thomas, the problem of claiming that human dignity is assaulted or not granted is a way of conceding that the people who suffered injustices in human history did not have dignity. Justice Thomas continued:

Those held in internment camps did not lose their dignity because the government confined them. And those denied governmental

¹² Travis Gettys, “Clarence Thomas Holds Some Pretty Horrifying Views on Human Dignity,” *Raw Story*, June 26, 2015.

benefits certainly do not lose their dignity because the government denies them those benefits. The government cannot bestow dignity and it cannot take it away.¹³

Justice Thomas also emphasized that people seem to expect a state intervention in bestowing human rights and dignity, a position he rejects. However, a government policy used to subjugate people could be perceived as a way to humiliate them and perhaps make them feel that they had lost their dignity. One example is the current refugee crisis in which a Danish policy approving seizure of valuables from refugees had been presented as an assault on their dignity.¹⁴

HUMAN DIGNITY IN EGYPT

The state is often targeted by dignity invocations, as seen with the protesters in Tahrir Square in 2011 who called for the state to respect and protect the *karama insaniyya* (human dignity) of the Egyptian people. From the uprisings' slogan of human dignity, it seems that the state is held responsible for human rights protection and that it had failed in this task. In this context of the state and individuals' bargain for rights, Martha Nussbaum stressed the compatibility between agency and victimhood as a fertile terrain for the development of human rights discourses for marginalized groups (2003). This recognition of victimhood is particularly important as recognition of otherness, which is often missing in universalist human rights' discourses.

In the case of Egypt, human rights seemed to be less central in the political discourse of Nasser, who was more concerned with national dignity (Hopwood, 1993). Sadat, conversely, used a discourse of political freedoms to first ally with the regime's opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, against factions in the regime that resisted him

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Remzi Cej, a Canadian human rights activist of Kosovar origin, discussed the matter in the article "If You Seize Refugees' Valuables, You Rob Them of Their Dignity," *The Globe and Mail*, January 26, 2016.

(Waterbury, 2014). In terms of popular perceptions, Sadat seemed to reach out to opposition parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to court the police, and to co-opt the traditional elite class (Cook, 2011, p. 126). Moreover, Sadat began to make direct appeals to the Egyptian public to ensure that he would get significant “support outside regime power brokers, leftists, and indispensable state organizations like the armed forces and the police” (Cook, 2011, p. 126). Sadat inherited a police state that had been crystalizing since the coup by the Free Officers and that had been vital to the group’s hold on power and its ability to co-opt interest groups. However, the people wanted a change and a transition to a real democratic regime. Indeed, this desire for change ran deep in Egyptian society at the time of Sadat, and despite the majority of Egyptians’ support for the July 1952 coup, which brought the important gain of independence, there was widespread support among Egyptians for a return to a properly functioning parliamentary system.

Youssef Chahine’s movies had attempted to represent Egyptian society and politics that resonated with Egyptians. For Instance, his movie *Sallahdin the Victorious* (1963) celebrated the courage of Nasser and likens him to Saladin in his fight against the Crusaders. In the 1980s, Chahine worked on a very different film that combines the psychological thriller with a lot of symbolism to refer to the social and political problems in Egypt back then. This work, *An Egyptian Story*, also focused on the use of the term “karama” by the different protagonists to emphasize the increasing humiliation that Egypt was facing. These symbols of humiliation appeared in, for example, the scene in which the film director compared the forced marriage of the protagonist’s sister to the raping of Egypt by foreign powers. In another poignant scene, the protagonist delivered a long monologue in which he questioned why people in Egypt dream of the West as the best model instead of appreciating their homeland. He followed by saying that he had the opportunity to go there but did not find the West as ideal as people might think and that their karama is in their home country. This interesting movie revealed some sentiments about karama

during the presidency of Sadat and worked to show that there was a lot of questioning to what might be going wrong with *karama* in Egypt.

To lure Egyptian people and respond to their feelings towards the need for a transition, Sadat employed the concept of “state of institutions” to establish the foundations for his presidency and distance his rule from a police state. He first used the concept in 1971, when he said in one of his presidential addresses: “Our departure is the new permanent Constitution ... which stipulates that our supreme authority belongs to the Alliances of the Toiling Popular Force’s ... the law is sovereign ... and that the state is founded on institutions, not individuals.” (Cook, 2011, p. 126) Here, Sadat marked a clear difference from Nasser’s rule, which despite also being based on institutions, was still overwhelmingly clustered around his persona.

Sadat’s propaganda of a language of freedom for political ends was, however, inconsistent with ongoing systems of torture of the opposition, in the style of the East German state security force, commonly known as Stasi, inherited from Nasser’s era and enhanced with the establishment of the Central Security Forces (CSF) (which were particularly targeted in the 2011 protests).¹⁵ After the assassination of Sadat, Mubarak came to power and played as well with opposing factions to legitimize his rule, but also continued with repressive methods (McDermott, 2012). Unlike Nasser’s socialist context, both Sadat and Mubarak favored a context of economic liberalization but one in which the benefits were limited to a small elite. Again, in these two liberal economic contexts and those post-Arab Uprisings, it is hard to picture a prosperous environment for the development of a society of rights in Egypt.

The [next chapter](#) looks at dignity in the sense of material possessions, including money and jobs and as expressed by many

¹⁵ Interview with Middle East expert Raymond Stock and former political prisoner Mohamed Soltan, *The Arena, Al Jazeera*, January 23, 2016.

protesters. It is important to remember that each theme is not completely isolated because there are interconnections between the different issues. For instance, in the notion of dignity as a human right, the material dimension of being able to get a job in a fair and egalitarian way with no privileges is embedded.

4 Dignity as Materialism

The basic confrontation which seemed to be colonialism versus anti-colonialism, indeed capitalism versus socialism, is already losing its importance. What matters today, the issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961

To understand the relationship between the government, market dynamics and society during the Arab Uprisings, it is important to remember these postcolonial conditions of the involved countries in the form of malfunctioning state institutions. Partha Chatterjee's book *Lineages of Political Society* (2011) is central in understanding postcolonial democracy and the rise of the Self in such contexts.¹ The book focuses on the postcolonial society in India and presents a system of interaction between governments and society that adapts to the reality of precarious living conditions in many parts of the postcolonial world. He uses the term "political society" for those who are the most socioeconomically marginalized in opposition to the classical "civil society." It is important to distinguish Chatterjee's political society with that of neo-Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who identified a political society as one that rules through force, whereas a civil society rules through consent (Gramsci, 1992). In a postcolonial context, Gramsci's differentiation between a political society and a civil society becomes obsolete, as political parties are

¹ From Zaynab El Bernoussi's doctoral thesis, "What Is Dignity? Descriptions of Karama in the 2011 Arab Spring Uprisings in Egypt," submitted in 2016 to POLS – *Sciences politiques et sociales* – UCL.

then only puppets in a staged intermediary system between the state and society, which masks their unilateral and top-down relationship. Chatterjee's political society of India seems to exist as well in Egypt, given that both are societies of the postcolonial world with development struggles. Chatterjee also stressed the rise of the Self and individualism in postcolonial India. This particular aspect of self-interest seems to be present in Chatterjee's model of "political society" as it strives to satisfy its individual (not collective) needs. The similarities between an Indian political society and an Egyptian one, specifically in relation to self-interest and individualization, show that individualization led to an understanding of dignity that moved from the national to an individualistic dimension, because the postcolonial state defaulted in its mission of protecting national dignity.² Dignity from the standpoint of political society is, thus, at odds, with a Habermasian view of dignity as what enables the status of democratic citizenship because dignity in political society is more inward looking and concentrates on the pragmatic individual, and not so much on the collective interest (Habermas, 2012). In Chatterjee's political society, however, the consequential individualistic and self-centered dimension of dignity has little room for civics. This means that such a conception of dignity does not prioritize democratic struggle, which might suggest a less enthusiastic terrain for democratic flourishing in the postcolonial world because of materialist priorities of improving living conditions and even basic survival. In the aftermath of Sadat's economic liberalization policies and, before that, with Nasser's industrial policies based on the reorganization of Egypt's labor force into hierarchical and vertically integrated production, the wealth gap has been ever-widening and government revenues have been reallocated from social support to

² In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, there seems to have been a particular interest in institutionalizing *karama* as a national goal in the case of Tunisia. See Zaynab El Bernoussi, "Tunisia's Long History of Constitutionalism," *Harvard Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*, November 6, 2017. <https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2017/11/06/tunisia-history-constitutionalism/>.

corporate support (Shenker, 2016). Interestingly, this context of expanding precarity in Egypt has been accompanied by a discourse of development needs, and sometimes even supported by strands of Islamic reformism (Mouftah, 2018). Greenlighting precarity for the sake of development hinders demands of economic rights as a form of human right to dignity.

Arab economies suffer from problems of rampant crony capitalism in which an elite is united in its exploitation of resources and power in a region (Waterbury, 2014). This elite, often led by the head of the state, strengthened this capitalist structure through the argument that the head of the country ought to lead because of his protective and patriarchal role. This structure also created a large gap between a ruling elite and a much poorer portion of the society, which coexist in very disproportionate segments. The financially deprived segment is often at the margins of the state's legality and lives in precarious conditions similar to those in Chatterjee's political society in India, which could be composed of squatters and destitute widowers, for instance. This political society benefits from the state's "generosity" (in different forms of aid) and sustains the local malfunctioning economic system (2011).

John Waterbury also commented on the significant solidarity in the region in terms of investment and aid, noted in Malcolm Kerr and Yassin El-Sayyid's book *Rich and Poor States in the Middle East: Egypt and the New Arab Order* (1982), in Saad Eddin Ibrahim's *New Arab Social Order* (1982) and in Michael C. Hudson's *The Middle East Dilemma* (1999). This solidarity, fueled by oil wealth, comes also in forms of migration of labor (which leads to the migration of ideas as well, such as Wahhabism) and reform of domestic policies. Nevertheless, Waterbury showed that the volume of inter-trade continues to be very slim (2014). In an open workshop during the 2014 annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in Washington, D.C., that focused on social movements in the Arab Uprisings, several participants talked about the power of using the Arab identity to fuel these social movements in the region during the

Arab Uprisings. Sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar³ pointed to a *belle âme* attitude (the notion that one deserves better because of one's noble traits), which inflates expectations of economic and political development. These expectations are soon confronted by the reality of poverty and authoritarianism in the region, and lead to exacerbating feelings of despair. In observing the Arab Uprisings events, the theme of Arab identity and unity had been much present. However, it is important to note that this expression of unity does not necessarily translate into a desire for national unity and integration in a single political unit, but more as a general regional sympathy and concern.

The tribulations of rentierism and economic problems related to the implementation of the neoliberal model in the region helped trigger the Tunisian revolution and the wider Arab Uprisings phenomenon. The economic policies in the region need to be radically changed in order to transform and reform the sociopolitical setting of local societies. Some hypocritical reforms, however, such as those launched by former head of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, right before the Arab Uprisings, promoted the protection of the middle class because of its importance in strengthening good governance and democratization, yet also called for implementing policies that would destroy this same middle class.

The problems of development and poverty are widespread in the region, but Tunisia was still considered an exception to the rule, especially in the period before the Arab Uprisings. Before the "Jasmine revolution" started in late 2010, Tunisia's human development index (HDI) was higher than the average in the Arab region, the world, and even closer to high HDI countries. Tunisia's HDI was not reflective of the disparities nor of the governance issues in the country. When looking more closely at human development in Tunisia, the disparities between rural and urban populations were notable. Therefore, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi was a poignant

³ This was during a workshop on the sociology of the Arab Uprisings led by political sociologist Charles Kurzman.

symbol of this sense of helplessness felt across the most marginalized groups in Tunisian society.⁴ This helplessness triggered a need to transform humiliation into self-esteem through a revolutionary act. Indeed, in his hopeless act, Bouazizi became the symbol of the *karama* of the Arab youth. His act also created a sense that gaining back *karama* was urgent and priceless, even if the price was often the lives of many of these protesters.

In Waterbury's (1987) analysis of the political economy of the Arab world, Islamism appeared to be a force opposing humiliation at home and abroad. Waterbury dedicated an analysis to Islamism as a social movement to show that the Islamist movements in the region were still struggling with power and legitimacy. However, the position of Islamists is strengthened as they are often in opposition to the government and present a potential alternative to a reality in which people are despondent. In this context, political scientist Ghassan Salamé proposed that the Arab defeat in 1967 was not only the failure of Arabism but also of modernists, which legitimized the Islamists' position that stressed the need for a religious state – since Israel was such a state and the 1960s were considered a period of “decadent” mores in Arab Muslim countries, as seen in Egyptian movies, for instance. These Islamist groups have to some extent benefited from a distressed economic environment to gild the alternative of strengthening an Islamic identity as a possible remedy to societal problems linked to an ill-implemented modernity.

One of the key goals of the modernity process triggered by the eighteenth-century industrialization and capitalist expansion that shaped most of today's societies is the ability to produce goods efficiently and abundantly. Tracing back the expansion of modernity to this period had often been suggested as being linked to a change in

⁴ Some speculate that Bouazizi's hopeless act was triggered by the fact that he felt humiliated that a female inspector slapped him. Others claim that the “slap” was a story invented to augment feelings of outrage among the Tunisian population. Elizabeth Day's article in *The Guardian*, “The Slap That Started a revolution” (May 15, 2011), discusses this debate.

social order based on a change in the modes of production. In this context in which prosperity seems to be measured by quantity, an ontological tendency that favors physical possessions as a measure of value has shaped the projects of development around the world. This tendency could be coined “materialism,” as an ethical attitude, and is useful in understanding how some people in the interviews presented *karama* as money and materialism, particularly in the context of modernizing societies (this leads to questioning a link between modernization and understanding *karama*). To put the theme of this chapter on dignity as materialism in context, we start, therefore, by looking at trends of global development, then trends of regional development and political economy in Arab countries and in Egypt in particular.

The history of global development is intricately linked with the rise of money for wealth accumulation. There is little doubt that, in most current societies, money buys influence, since it has become a bartering veil that is needed to acquire most of the goods that form the “good life.” Historian Niall Ferguson tracked what he called “the ascent of money” in human history to demonstrate that financial concerns are central to many historical developments, including the rise of human rights and human dignity movements (2008). Ferguson’s argument on the centrality of money, as a source of wealth and capital accumulation associated with power and prosperity, is rather strong and it could be seen in some of the interviews in this study. Indeed, the material conceptualization of dignity as land or as a job is, after all, a form of commodification of dignity. This conceptualization may lead to creating a relationship between dignity and the acquisition of wealth.

To return to the process of modernity, it is important to note that the ideological foundation of this process is often traced back to the philosophy of the Enlightenment period that influenced first the political development of several European states and then their respective economic development. The philosophers of this period had also been credited for their influence in advocating for political

liberal thought, which underlies the establishment of many modern institutions. However, notable scholars such as Reinhart Koselleck pointed out the elitist backgrounds of those philosophers, who often did not grasp the realities of politics and who could explain an enduring critique of the process of modernity.⁵ The literature dealing with modernity is very broad and extensive but, to stay focused on the literature relevant to the interviews I conducted, the focus here is on economic development in particular. In what concerns economic modernity, it could be a comprehensive societal drive, often led by state policies, to acquire widespread wealth through productivity. To become economically modern, most countries had to develop their institutions to trigger societal change. In countries of the Global South, development endeavors were also a way to maintain relationships with countries of the Global North after the decolonization process. Many of the development endeavors in these former colonies were centered on aid. In terms of development discourse, international relations theorist Jenny Edkins showed how certain organizations and states depoliticized the language that described hunger, for instance, to better serve practices of aid. Edkins (2000) was worried about a depoliticization of hunger and aid, because politics provide a process of constant decision making and questioning that technological and managerial techniques (as associated with the process of depoliticizing) do not provide. Here a question regarding the politics of dignity comes to mind: Can a depoliticization of dignity bring more attention to the rise of a dignity discourse? Similarly, to the depoliticization of hunger and aid, an environment where dignity is routinely assaulted, as with repressive regimes, provides a platform for the depoliticization of dignity, because forms of participatory decision making in claims for human rights and dignity are undermined.

Political scientist Sa'ed Abdel Atshan draws a parallel with Edkins' analysis of the depoliticization of hunger in Africa with the

⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (MIT Press, 1988).

case of international aid provisions in Palestinian society. Atshan (2013) talks about a sort of zero-sum game between dignity and dependency. This relationship has, according to him, gradually depoliticized dignity in the same way international aid became depoliticized in the Palestinian territories.

The political economy of the Middle East and North Africa has been studied extensively, revealing issues of authoritarian political structures coupled with systems of economic privileges, such as the one of solidarism. This, in turn, creates an increasing othering and alienation of the least privileged classes, who are also subjected to political repression that intensifies their feelings of a lack of dignity. Moreover, the region's leaders, "nearly obsessed with control, have emasculated the very political organizations they created to mobilize and integrate the masses" (Cammatt et al., 2013, p. 325). This shows how authoritarianists perceive their social constituents as threats to their authority and can spend much energy in containing this threat rather than developing their own institutions and other government programs (such as economic reform and infrastructure). Solidarism, being a tenet of the political economy in the region, depends on corporatism, which is the sociopolitical organization of a society by major interest groups or corporate groups. These groups can be religious, political, economic or ethnic. Groups can also be formed around an interest in the military, a particular patron, or scientific affiliations, for instance. In sociologist Émile Durkheim's model of solidarism, specific groups of interest create an organic social solidarity through functional representation.⁶ Moreover, solidarism presents human society as a collective space, where individuals' actions are chiefly relevant when they address a communal need.⁷ Indeed, the sum of an individual's acts is not the same as the collective action. In societies where solidarism is prevalent, interest groups seem to have

⁶ David Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (Simon and Schuster, 2014 [1893]).

⁷ *Ibid.*

greater influence in shaping individuals' cultural and social characteristics. In the fiscal crises of the 1980s and 1990s in Egypt, the implications of solidarism could be seen with the one-party state under both Nasser and Sadat, in which an austere policy reform disproportionately affected different social groups because of selective enforcement (Soliman, 2011, p. 124). Disproportionally favoring particular groups in a society where solidarism is prevalent can also exacerbate already existing problems of sectarianism in the region.

Despite the failure of political parties in the region, solidarism has, conversely, supported the power of unions and syndicates in local politics. Indeed, many of the Arab countries that witnessed uprisings in 2011 have unions that had pushed for major strikes only a few years or even months before the start of the Arab Uprisings. In the case of Morocco, the power of unions has led in some cases to the complete death of certain industrial sectors, such as textile exports, because the government feared an increase in social unrest if lower wages were maintained. Of course, while increasing wages can contribute to the improvement of the standards of living for the local workers and their dependents, an increase in wages also jeopardizes the competitiveness of local industries, as they participate in the global economy, leading to more unemployment (a sort of catch-22 problem). In the case of Morocco, the competitiveness of the textile industry was sacrificed in order to avoid social unrest.⁸

The problem with the political structures in the region is also the concentration of power among small groups of individuals that exchange benefits in a network of patrons and clients, as seen in countries such as Algeria and Iraq under Saddam Hussein (Cammett et al., 2013). This power concentration in the patron–client network is coined “clientelism” and it can also further exacerbate sectarianism. The attributes of clientelism sustain a structure in which an elite is

⁸ Zaynab El Bernoussi, “North African Textiles Shifting to Vietnam?,” *Asia Pacific Affairs Council Journal*, Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University (Winter 2011).

continuously empowered at the expense of the rest of the society. This layout was called the “politics of the belly” by political scientist Jean-François Bayart to connote the importance of transfer of services between patrons and clients (1993). The Oujda group⁹ in Algeria and the Takriti clan in Iraq, in reference to Takrit, Saddam Hussein’s birthplace and powerhouse, represent cases of political clientelism. The current political unrest in Syria that was sparked by the Arab Uprisings shows that this pseudo-democratic functioning is quite volatile when the leadership is under threat. This volatility was also experienced, in the case of Iraq, with the repression targeting the Takriti clan, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The clan mechanisms include mutual services and money transfers (including financing funerals and marriages of the poor, for instance) in exchange for protection and votes. These mechanisms also appear in Chatterjee’s “political society,” as between the elite in power and the poor there is a form of social pact or social contract, which is essential for a pseudo-democratic functioning (2011).

However, during the “Arab Citizenship in the New Political Era” conference, held in Rabat in May 2014, that discussed the changes in the political culture of Arab countries after the uprisings, political scientist Robert Springborg talked about the agency potential of clientelism in Arab countries. He theorized that a political culture that supports a relationship between ruler and governed, shaped after a patron–client model, can be played out by the governed to exert greater power over the rulers. Springborg also stressed the fact that the *karama*/dignity claims in the Arab Uprisings reflected the people’s increasing demand for materialism, a point of view shared by sociologist Valentine Moghadam, who added, at the conference, that the uprisings in the regions should be coined a “Dignity Spring.”

⁹ The name “Oujda group” originates from the fact that Colonel Boumediene was stationed in Oujda (a border city in eastern Morocco) during the FLN war along with other important members of the FLN group, such as Chadli Bendjedid. Both Boumediene and Bendjedid were, respectively, the second and third presidents of Algeria.

It is important to remember here that the promise of economic modernity in liberalizing markets and expanding democratic processes in several countries of the Arab region such as Egypt has failed (Kienle, 2001; Cammett et al., 2013). The implication of this failed promise is that these societies have a negative view of liberalism and have become disillusioned with the promises of economic and political development (Kienle, 2001). Economic analyst Andrew Lilico had even proposed a correlation between the sparking of the Arab Uprisings and the global economic distress that affected different income groups.¹⁰ Indeed, the Arab Uprisings throughout the region occurred immediately after a sharp increase in commodity prices and the inability of already distressed markets in many developing countries to adjust. The US Federal Reserve's second phase of quantitative easing – meaning the Federal Reserve's purchasing of US Treasury bonds – had created a sharp and unprecedented increase in commodity prices in the Middle East region, particularly in Egypt, which in turn increased pressures on local governments to reduce subsidies that are vital to supporting a major portion of the Egyptian population, not only the poorest sector.

The increase in the price of commodities presented a threat to local governments of the Middle East region as they are heavily dependent on food imports: Egypt's agriculture ministry reported in 2010 that the country imports 40 percent of its total foods and 60 percent of its wheat, which constitutes a considerable food gap. The rising commodity prices could intensify the food gap issue in Egypt. Moreover, the economic crisis in Europe that followed the eruption of the US mortgage debt crisis in 2007 also resulted in shrinking remittances from Europe toward countries south of the Mediterranean such as Morocco and Egypt (both are in the top three of those countries

¹⁰ Andrew Lilico, "How the Fed Triggered the Arab Spring Uprisings in Two Easy Graphs," *The Telegraph*, May 3, 2011. www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/8492078/How-the-Fed-triggered-the-Arab-Spring-uprisings-in-two-easy-graphs.html.

receiving remittances in the region¹¹). For instance, Moroccan nationals in Europe started sending less money home (World Bank's data on remittance inflows shows a drop from US\$6.895 billion in 2008 to US\$6.271 billion in 2009 and a relative stagnation up to 2011). The reduction of this significant resource of revenue to the local population and the increasing price of food exacerbated locals' despair with economic and political development in an increasingly interconnected world. In Egypt as well, economic and social distress arose as a result of reduced inflow of foreign remittances. The resulting social and economic degradation has led to a widening economic gap between individuals' expectations of state control over the economy and falling levels of perceived well-being in the society. This gap can also be looked at from the perspective of sociologist James Chowning Davies' J-curve on the theory of political revolutions. Davies saw a strong relationship between variations in economic growth and rising social unrest, which is, to a certain extent, similar to the case of the 2011 revolutionary uprisings in Egypt. It is also important to note that this gap between expectations and reality can affect different economic groups and not only the most financially deprived (interviewees reported on this diversity).

An increasingly educated population that demands economic reform and democratic transition has also challenged the current political economy issues of the Middle East and North Africa (Cammatt et al., 2013). The decrease in the world prices of carbohydrates and the progressive depletion of natural resources in the region, in addition to shrinking foreign remittances due to global economic distress, is pushing the need for more efficient systems of tax collection in the region to make states more accountable to their citizens and lead to improvement in local governance.

¹¹ Migrant remittance inflows (US\$ billion) in Egypt, 2020: 24,831, which represents 6.7 percent of GDP. Migrant remittance inflows (US\$ billion) in Morocco, 2020: 6,382, which represents 5.7 percent of GDP. Egypt is in first position, followed by Lebanon and Morocco. Source: World Bank, 2020.

The economic growth model in Egypt, and in most societies of the Global South that were pushed into neoliberal remodelling, witnessed an increasing divide between the poor and the rich, which again provided a fertile ground for social unrest in Egypt and, by extension, countries of the Arab world (Hourani, 1991; Kienle, 2001). This accumulation of social and economic issues triggered political activism, particularly with unions as seen with Egypt and Tunisia, which provided fertile ground for the Arab Uprisings protests. In the case of Egypt, the context preceding the call for dignity in the Arab Uprisings revealed that political exclusion, both from outside and from within, created a depoliticized environment that was re-politicized with the help of popular demands such as that for dignity.

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT

In this chapter, the relationship between materialism and dignity/karama suggested in the interviews and in some of the protesters' demands during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt was first set in the context of the political and economic project of development in today's modern and global societies. In this section, the aim is to review some of the critiques of this political and economic project of development in modern societies and in structural adjustments exposed in new models for socioeconomic progress, particularly to provide for an alternative to strict materialism.

Marxist theorist Guy Debord provided a first critique of a materialist modern society that he called a "society of spectacle" (1967) and in which he showed that individuals who were more concerned with having than being, were now even more concerned with appearing to have than actually having. Debord claimed that the unstoppable commodification of life reduces human values, which could then threaten values such as dignity into becoming mere superficial representations. In the context of the global hegemony of capitalist economic models, the ever-increasing arrays of commodities that can be bought seem to favor a so-called commodification of life. The ability to earn money and acquire possessions had often been

glorified in the works of the New Thought¹² and other self-help movements as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, which again supported the expansion of materialism and the advancement of self-interest. Conversely, Gramscian concern with “hegemony” as a critique of capitalist society presented the inherent need for self-consciousness. Postcolonialist Hamid Dabashi (2012) argued that the Arab Uprisings demonstrated the rise of self-consciousness in postcolonial societies, which presents an important challenge to the advancement of self-interest and the individualization of survival (Armstrong, 2013). The rise of self-consciousness also reveals a link with life as a spectacle in Debord’s sense but with an even greater drive for accumulation in the context of accelerated globalization (Kellner, 2012).

The aspect of self-interest, however, seems to be present in Chatterjee’s model of the “political society.” Indeed, this political society strives to satisfy its individual needs rather than the collective needs of the community (2011). In an attempt to satisfy one’s needs, dignity is often equated with money and jobs. The discussion of measuring dignity, as part of human development, revealed the importance of *karama* and dignity as materialism. During the uprisings, *karama* claims often appeared right next to claims for jobs and bread. The human development discourse in which dignity is claimed is also associated with Europe’s influence in the Global South (through the philosophy of the Enlightenment and liberal political thought), and this influence is perceived as patronizing. Therefore, this influence also leads to feelings of indignation among those populations of the Global South that had experienced colonization from European countries.

¹² The New Thought movement was founded in the United States by Phineas P. Quimby (1802–1866) as a mind-healing and spiritual movement that is based on religious (especially Christian) and metaphysical presuppositions. This movement was a reaction to religious skepticism. One major work to cite is Wallace Delois Wattles’ seminal book, *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910).

With a focus on the Global South, Indian Nobel Prize–winner Amartya Sen (who coined the term “development as freedom”) and Pakistani economist and politician Mahbub ul Haq focused on promoting human development and considered humans to be the real wealth of nations (Haq, 1995; Sen, 1999). Their approach also places a distance on the measurement of development strictly based on income. Their idea is that income is not the only focus of development. This attention to individuals in development is what they introduced as the capability approach, which provides a balance between material measures to assess economic development and nonmaterial measures to assess well-being.¹³

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who worked with Amartya Sen, went on to define ten basic capabilities that clearly expand nonmaterial and nonmonetary sources of “wealth” (2000): ability to live; bodily health; bodily integrity; ability to sense, imagine and think; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; ability to live with concern for and in relation with other species; ability to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities; and finally the ability to have control over one’s environment. In this list, Nussbaum integrated important postmaterialist dimensions such as emotional well-being and what she called a freedom to “affiliation” to designate both the ability to live with others (protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech) and the social bases of self-respect and honor. She defined those social bases as being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others (adopting provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species).

Martha Nussbaum challenged Haq and Sen’s capability approach by suggesting that human dignity should be integrated to such an approach in order to construct a theory of basic social justice

¹³ Paul Anand, Christina Santos and Ron Smith “The Measurement of Capabilities,” in *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen*, ed. Kaushik Basu and Ravi Kanbur (Oxford University Press, 2009), 283–310.

(2009, p. 230). This evolution of development toward the promotion of the capability approach and social justice allows for the promotion of the concept of dignity in the international development discourse, as well as in the human rights discourse. Moreover, there is an increasing scholarship on development from authors with experiences and interests in the Global South, which, to a certain extent, challenges a Eurocentric approach to development. Grassroots movements are particularly challenging the Eurocentric claims in international development, which make development a patronizing discourse that suffocates the local people's agency. Grassroots development movements and groups, operating locally, have helped to make international development an experience to which locals can more easily relate.

Despite these new developments in the field of international development, the field has also been criticized for being based mainly on the economic model of only the most developed countries. In this regard, alternative models are being studied, such as so-called Islamic economics. Proponents of Islamic economics advance that the ideals in Islam are different from ideals of productivity and money making. Nonetheless, some Muslim economists have produced theories and practices, which, although they claim to be alternatives to capitalism and socialism, are much the same. Some of these Islamic theories on economics had been associated with a moral economy opposed to a capitalist model (Tripp, 2006).

Most of the people interviewed stressed the need to reject marketization and consumerism in order to cure the several ills of modern societies. In this specific context of modern societies, protesters have seen in the revolution an opportunity to revalue the powers of communitarian actions. Indeed, an understanding of dignity as communitarian generosity had been claimed in moments when collective action had enabled change that could not have been achieved if isolated individuals were to act. One example is what had been termed a "fight for dignity" by Rwandan journalist Sunny Ntayombya when commenting on the popular solidarity and generosity of Rwandans against the international arrest of Rwandan general Karenzi Karake in London. Karake

was arrested under a Spanish warrant for war crimes, and his bail was paid for with donations from Rwandan civilians, who called the arrest an outrage and a humiliation. Ntayombya went on to say that this example of solidarity, from the local community, could be a model to follow in the case of the crisis in Greece. According to Ntayombya, the debt problems in Greece can be solved much faster if the European community would decide to come together and take action.¹⁴ This example of a country outside of the Arab region but still of the Global South is an instance of increasing collective action and strengthening of the values of solidarity, particularly in a post-conflict context.

The solidarity during the Arab Uprisings was expressed in using similar demands, such as "*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*" (meaning, "the people want the fall of the regime") and "*khobz, karama wa 'adala ijtimaiyya*" (meaning, "bread, dignity and social justice") across countries. These chants epitomized new forms of political subjectivity and a strong desire for a new relationship between the rulers and the ruled, according to political scientist Sami Zemni, who looked in particular at the case of the Tunisian revolution in the Arab Uprisings (2013). Zemni talked about common regional demands for a moral economy in the Middle East and North Africa as a result of the long rule of authoritarian regimes in the region. These demands also aim at challenging the materialist values in local societies (Zemni, 2013). The concept of karama as materialism is coterminous with the concept of karama as a human right and nationality as mentioned. Indeed, these two concepts come together in the discourse of human development in which empowering capabilities is considered a human right to both material and nonmaterial well-being.

EXPRESSIONS OF KARAMA AS MATERIALISM

In Egyptian popular culture, signs of rising individualism in the society have been increasingly revealed. The artistic scene, particularly

¹⁴ Sunny Ntayombya, "Our Fight for Dignity Is Not a Mere Skirmish but a Continuous War," *The New Times*, July 8, 2015.

popular music, focused on the difficulty of the *dunya* (connoting the “everyday life, down on earth”) and how it is full of struggle and betrayal and where only people with money can survive.¹⁵ On the other hand, Şonallah Ibrahim’s novel *Honor* (1997) presents the abusive practices of multinational medical corporations in exploiting illnesses in developing nations. Without delving into the details of the story, it is important to note that this seminal work in Egyptian literature depicts Egyptian society as harsh, unjust and, to a certain extent, in need of recovering dignity.

Alaa Al Aswany, another major Egyptian novelist and founding member (in 2004) of the political movement *Kefaya* (from the word “Enough” in Egyptian Arabic), an anti-Mubarak pressure group aiming for political liberalization, published the notorious *Yacoubian Building* in 2002. This book presents a crisis of Egyptian-ness and was turned into a notable movie in 2006 with the same title, starring Adel Imam as the protagonist. Imam is Zaki Bey, the heir to an apartment in what had once been one of Cairo’s affluent neighborhoods,¹⁶ but that had changed over the years to become an impoverished one. The movie exposes the lives of very different characters (a rich businessman, a poor Islamist student, a homosexual magazine editor, and so on) that are all prosecuted in one way or another by the State and by the society. Moreover, the movie also portrays a disturbing reality in societies where corruption is widespread, as “rich” characters are not subjected to the law even if they commit crimes (the rich businessman forces his second wife to have an abortion), whereas other “poor” characters are humiliated by law enforcement authorities (the poor student is raped in prison). The final scene of the movie shows Adel Iman screaming in despair in the middle of a Cairo street: “Where is karama?” The scene’s symbolism is poignant in expressing the sentiment that Egyptian society was lacking karama.

¹⁵ Reference to the Egyptian singer Boussy’s song “Ah Ya Duniya.”

¹⁶ This also reflects the urban development of cities in which the physical frontier between rich and poor has become more apparent with new affluent neighborhoods built on the outskirts of the cities.

The condemnation of consumerism and materialism in Egyptian society carried on until the 2011 revolution. Of course, several musical artists used such themes during the revolutionary uprisings, but the case of Yasser El Manawahly is unique. This self-taught guitarist, who did not read music notes, was a car dealer until the fall of the Mubarak regime, when he decided to dedicate his life to lyrics containing Egyptian idioms and puns and engaged with virulent political messages. El Manawahly used a vernacular language and set modest stages, often in his own home. In El Manawahly's song "Sandouq" (2012), in reference to the International Monetary Fund, the singer garnered one of his first hits amidst the Morsi leadership. The song, full of wit and sarcasm, condemned the signing of a \$4.8 billion loan agreement between Egypt and the IMF. This agreement was signed without any parliamentary or public debate, which went against the goals of the 2011 uprisings in terms of involving the people in governance.¹⁷ In "Sandouq," El Manawahly sang:

Help me, shackle me with your loan
 Graze in our country and consider it your land
 You are my partner in my thoughts, you plan our future and then
 confiscate my decisions
 Why did we have a revolution?
 Why did people die?
 Explain what dignity means, what "hold your head up high"
 means?
 And why did we chant, "down, down with ..." ?

The song continues with references to conditions of poverty and precarity in Egypt both in the lyrics and in the music video.

Prior to the release of the song "Sandouq," Youssra El Hawary, a young musical artist of the revolution, also produced a hit, "El Soor"

¹⁷ Amira Howeidy, "Yasser El Manawahly: Music as Political Act," *Al Ahram*, February 22, 2014.

(2012), meaning the “wall,” in which her very simple lyrics juxtapose seemingly grand State endeavors such as erecting and protecting institutions of order (with the wall), with simple human acts such as peeing:

In front of the wall
 In front of the ones who built it
 In front of the wall
 In front of the ones who erected it
 And in front of the one who guards it as well
 A poor man stopped to pee
 On the wall and those who built it, erected it and guard it
 On the wall and the ones who built it, the man peed¹⁸

El Hawary makes a reference to poverty and misery by talking precisely about a poor man (“*ragel ghalban*”).

INTERVIEWS

The dimension of materiality and the concern over the lack of resources, such as money and jobs, were often brought up in the interviews. Heba was an academic in her late forties who was in Tahrir on January 25, 2011, with her husband and two young daughters. She said that she wanted to commemorate this historical event as a family moment so that when her children grow older, they would associate the revolution with dignity in line with their family values. Heba was very enthusiastic to hear about my focus on *karama*, and she added that she was happy to see that a young Moroccan woman could have such an interest. Heba lamented the materialism of Egyptian society because money seemed to buy everything, even *karama*. Heba also said that the financial situation of many Egyptians had been difficult in the past few years. She said that in her case, she was doing fine, but that there are many things that she

¹⁸ Retrieved February 29, 2016, from www.arabicmusictranslation.com/2012/04/youssra-el-hawari-walls-essour.html.

could not afford to provide to her daughters, like her parents did for her. Heba also mentioned that *el ghalaba keteer fi Misr* (meaning, “there are a lot of poor people in Egypt”) and that they seemed to be getting poorer with the current global economic crisis. She mentioned an apparent drop in tourism revenues in Egypt even before the Arab Uprisings.¹⁹ Heba also mentioned that those who made up the Egyptian diaspora, experiencing the economic crises in Europe and in the United States, were also sending less money back home than they used to do.

In the very first days of the 2011 protests in Egypt, a journalist reported the words of an Egyptian protester who had been unemployed for over a decade and who had been living in the Cairo streets with his wife and three children. The poor man was on-site during the events of the uprisings and reported: “I want my 3-year-old child to grow up with dignity and to find a job just like the President.”²⁰ This material conception of dignity, as a job, as money or as land, seems to be equally important for people from very different socioeconomic backgrounds. Such conception contradicts a conception of dignity that is part of the realm of self-expression values, in the context of post-materialism.

For Heba and others interviewed, money buys *karama* and *karama* is getting a job and even being able to get married.

When confronted with the topic of money and *karama*, most respondents seemed to react spontaneously at first. Indeed, the quick reaction was to condemn an association of *karama* and money, as almost a blasphemy due to the apparent “noble” and holy nature of

¹⁹ The tourism industry in Egypt suffers from drops in the volumes of tourists with almost every terror attack. For instance, in 1997 an attack by an extremist Islamist group led to the killing of sixty tourists at a Luxor archaeological site. In 2006, a bomb at the resort town of Dahab killed twenty-three people. Shortly after both events, the number of tourists in Egypt had dropped drastically. Source: A. H. “Diving In,” *The Economist*, The Middle East Pomegranate, February 24, 2014. www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/02/24/diving-in.

²⁰ Maggie Michael, “Mubarak Faces Egypt Protests on ‘Day of Rage,’” *The Huffington Post*, January 25, 2011.

karama, versus the negative and greedy nature of money. However, during the conversations, respondents would agree that money could provide for a privileged treatment that offers karama to a person in her state and society.

Hany, an engineer in his late thirties working in France, affirmed that “nothing can be achieved without bread and butter on the dinner table,” and that the material dimension of dignity is unquestionable. He added that he understands that some people may see something pure about dignity, versus a cold material reality to money, but he thinks that this is due to the problem of hypocrisy in Egyptian society. Hany added that this hypocrisy extends to the Islamists, who claim to be people only interested in satisfying God, whereas their real interests are power and money. Hany continued by saying that in societies where life standards are high, people might be less materialistic. However, in the case of Egypt, where life standards are low due to serious problems of unemployment and poverty among the majority of the population, materialism ought to be central in people’s lives. For Hany, the development issues in Egypt have made people’s lives an everyday hustle in which fighting for a few *guenehs* (meaning, “Egyptian pounds”) is a matter of plain survival.

Waleed moved to work in the Gulf at the beginning of 2015. During the 2011 events, he had just graduated from high school and went to enrol in a private university in Cairo. He reported that there were different types of young people in the uprisings, but mostly they were, like him, from the middle class and fond of the underground culture. When I asked him to explain what this culture was, he replied that those were people who wanted things differently, were against the norms and were not very religious. He also explained that many of the people protesting were small entrepreneurs from the private sector and that there were no poor people. For him, those entrepreneurs were against Gamal Mubarak who made the private sector even more exclusive to an elite close to the circles of the Mubarak family.

A PRICE FOR DIGNITY

In this discussion of karama and identity, it seems that there is a relationship between economy, dignity, oppressiveness, and democracy not only in Egypt but also throughout the world. Indeed, many of the current events, from the European crisis to the Iranian nuclear deal, revolve around these themes. It seems that the rhetoric related to those events enables a space of negotiation between different interest groups. For instance, the European crisis, involving Greece, presents a rhetorical game in which parties are negotiating debt repayment plans, while also claiming to respect people's dignity and the need to support European values of democracy and solidarity. The current pandemic will certainly compound this. Overall, it is important to stress that discussions of identity in politics often revolve around the concept of nation because of its centrality to modern state structures, even if this nation is an "imagined community."²¹

Dignity and karama are concepts with multiple meanings, which may trigger betraying mechanisms, meaning that their loose definition as recognition of human worth can lead to excluding particular groups as unworthy (not included in the worthy category). Indeed, karama can be considered exclusive and not intrinsic to human nature, if it is conceptualized as some form of virtue or merit. This dilemma in characterizing dignity as intrinsic or extrinsic is a fundamental issue for the concept that this study does not pretend to resolve, as reiterated in the other thematic chapters.

Claiming that dignity is to be earned, as Pope Francis has repeated since his papacy began in March 2013, may seem to go against the claim that dignity is intrinsic to humans. However, in a Roman Catholic conception, dignity is intrinsic but can be jeopardized by material and spiritual deficiencies, as, for instance, losing one's autonomy and needing others' help to survive instead of being

²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, 2006 [1983]).

able to fulfil one's needs independently. The status of the Pope as the spokesperson for the Catholic community, one of the largest religious communities in the world, and also as a global figure is undeniable. Some of the Pope's statements include, "We do not get dignity from power or money or culture. We get dignity from work" (spoken during the Feast of Saint Joseph the Worker in 2013):

[Not] having work not only means not having the necessities of life: no. We can eat every day: we can go to Caritas, to this association or to that club, where they will give us something to eat. But that's not the problem. The problem is not being able to bring the bread home: this is serious and this robs people of dignity! This takes away their dignity." (In July 2014, when the pope met with over six hundred workers affected by the economic crisis in Molise, Italy)²²

This recurrent theme of dignity as work and as a job implies that people may not have dignity until they get to work. However, it is more probable that despite the simplicity of this quote, the Pope perhaps referred to a more complex Catholic understanding of "dignity" in which this value is also acquired in the process of working (contributing to the overall good), in addition to an intrinsic dimension of dignity (people as creatures of God). But in using simple formulas that link dignity to a job, the resulting effect could be that the two are equated and then one can ask: What if someone cannot work or what if she simply does not want to work nor does she want to contribute to the overall good? Does that make her unworthy of dignity (and in which dimension)?

Elevating dignity to an important status for the identity of human beings and, yet, causing it to be dependent on external factors can create deception as with the example of having a job, yet not feeling dignified.. Indeed, the working conditions in the job may

²² Pope Francis speech, "Meeting with the World of Labour and Industry, Address of Pope Francis," Great Hall of the University of Molise (Campobasso), July 5, 2014. Source: www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/july/documents/papa-francesco_20140705_molise-mondo-del-lavoro.html.

contrast with the treatment of the workers, calling into question their actual condition of dignity.

In this chapter's attention to materialism, it is important to return to the context of the rise of human rights and human dignity discourses that support nonmaterial dimensions of well-being and compare and contrast them to the representations of *karama* related to materialism seen here. This rise has been seen not only in different societies but also in designing new development models that are precisely concerned with more egalitarian economic conditions for more social justice. Similar to those in Egypt in 2011, these societies witnessed revolutionary dynamics that were not only against political regimes or economic management, but also against a social order and a construction of the world as seen with materialism.

To understand dignity and the politics of dignity, one needs to contextualize the rise of dignity in relation to discourses of human rights, democracy and human development, which could be considered modernist and Universalist discourses (Cheah, 2006). In a globalized and interconnected world, understandings of the concept of dignity that differ from the universalist one can present challenges to egalitarianism. Indeed, how can we speak of universal equality (a utopian concept) of human beings, when the understanding of dignity, an essential argument for equality, is not accepted by all? Can *karama* be measured? Taken? Restored? Or is it intrinsic? In a pragmatic sense, a way to respond to these questions is to contemplate ways to measure *karama* and dignity. Some recent development indices have attempted to account for a dignity measurement. For instance, philosopher Martha Nussbaum and economist Amartya Sen's capability approach attempted to include dignity as an important trigger for human empowerment and sustainable development in societies pressured by capitalism.

Stéphane Hessel's *Time for Outrage* (originally published as *Indignez-vous*) suggested that younger Europeans needed to feel angry given the rampant capitalist system that has worked to impoverish them (2010). Hessel's call for indignation was a call not to revolt only against political regimes as the responsible entities for social and

economic problems – it was a call to revolt against a widespread capitalist system in which wide income gaps are shocking and to question public morality. Again, far from concerns of Arab consciousness and *karama* or dignity, Hessel's piece reemphasized the strong link between dignity as an individual and as a nation and the need for social justice to allow for a better distribution of resources and fairer access to opportunities. So, can one say that dignity claims arise when social injustice increases? Is dignity dependent on material prosperity? In the movie *The House of Rothschild* (directed by Alfred L. Werker, 1934), tracing the history of the family of the same name and which historian Niall Ferguson uses as an example for the "ascent of money," dignity seemed to be directly linked to wealth creation.²³ Terminally ill patients interviewed in Hong Kong concurred (Ho et al., 2013). Pope Francis spoke with President Obama at the White House in 2015 and stated that younger people need jobs to feel dignified in their societies.

As seen with the Davies' J-curve, the rise of social and economic demands increases the likelihood of political turmoil. Political sociologist Barrington Moore Jr. compared several revolutions to find out that a main driver in the French revolution was the influence of the bourgeoisie (1966, p. 418). When looking at revolutions, Moore revealed that he had a Marxist influence that produced his comparative historical analysis of different revolutions in different countries (Munck and Snyder, 2008). This comparative historical approach uses a dialectical perspective that sees the occurrence of events as an ever-changing process in which the past informs the present. This is not to say that looking at Moore's analysis of the French revolution explains

²³ In an important scene for the development of the story, weakening father Rothschild, sensing the approach of his death, called his five sons in order to instruct them on how to build a strong banking empire, become rich and acquire dignity – Father Mayer Amschel Rothschild: "Remember this before all. Neither business, nor power, nor all the gold in Europe will bring you happiness, till we, our people, have equality, respect, dignity. To trade with dignity, to live with dignity, to walk the world with dignity." (Passage from minute 17 and 10 seconds to minute 17 and 44 seconds.) <https://archive.org/details/The.House.of.Rothschild>.

the revolutionary process in Egypt; rather, the attempt is to show different historical episodes with their similarities and differences.

Revolutions are interesting objects of research as they present a sociological and political dynamic to use to understand what drives people. Moore's analysis of the bourgeoisie in France showed that this class had a significant influence in triggering the revolution. Moore did not study the 2011 revolutionary process in Egypt, but his argument on the influence of the bourgeoisie or a social class of middle- to high-income businesspeople might be revealing because the middle class in Egypt was also influential in the 2011 events. In the period preceding the Arab Uprisings in Egypt, the Sadat and Mubarak regimes had particularly disfavored the urban salariat (Soliman, 2011). Middle East expert Asher Susser also talked about the difficulty of a young generation in Arab countries and called it a status of "waithood," in which youths wait for jobs, for marriage and even for intimacy (2012). Indeed, many scholars have observed early signs of revolutionary potential due to this middle-class crisis in the region of North Africa and the Middle East (Cammatt et al., 2013). Youths from the middle class presented the class with greater potential to desire change because of their intermediary position (not completely dependent on government's aid, yet not able to reap the benefits of a neoliberal economy) (Waterbury, 2014).

The Iranian Islamic revolution can be compared to the Arab Uprisings of 2011. In *Life as Politics*, Asef Bayat reconsiders Moore's argument of "moral outrage" (Moore, 1978) among the middle class in Iran to show that people of this class have less to lose in demanding a revolution due to their feeling of being stuck in their socioeconomic status, which triggers the so-called outrage (2009). It seems that revolutions erupt at a tipping point when people's outrage becomes unbearable (see Davies' J-curve in which the gap between expectations and reality is no longer acceptable): but how much outrage can people endure before triggering a revolution? The predictability of revolutions has been speculated, and this speculative approach to studying revolutions needs to be questioned, as it might reveal a

problematic need for explanatory arguments in social sciences. Indeed, an anti-explanation approach could enable abandoning retro-active predictions in favor of understanding the retrospective assessment of the past experiences of those who lived through the revolution (Kurzman, 2004, p. 166). This research adopts a similar approach of focusing on the retrospective assessment of the past experiences of the revolution instead of retroactively predicting the Egyptian Arab Uprisings in 2011 or the use of claims of dignity.

Despite the centrality of material and economic motives, emotionally charged demands for *karama*/dignity may have produced the tipping point from civil action lethargy to political and civil rebellion – the 2011 uprisings in Egypt. The strength of dignity claims in triggering action can also be seen in the example of Greek debt issues. Former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has been claiming the need to acknowledge the dignity of the Greek people in the face of economic austerity, and this claim has received significant popular support despite the mainstream media attempts to tarnish the image of Tsipras' party (Syriza) as a threat to the country.²⁴ Tsipras' campaign called the Greek people to vote against the European austerity package, supporting his dignity claims and becoming Syriza's leitmotif.²⁵ Of course, while it may seem hard to reject such calls for dignity, it is also important to question the need to present the dignity of the people as interwoven in money and materiality. This association of dignity with money could jeopardize the autonomy of an understanding of dignity from economic conditions and unveil a struggle between materialism and post-materialism.²⁶ These concerns over a material society were also noted several times in the interviews and in several Egyptian artworks. The controversial rapprochement between dignity and

²⁴ Alexis Tsipras' activism on Twitter allows one to track down his repetitive uses of the concept of the dignity of the Greek people, as seen in this Twitter post of June 28, 2015: https://twitter.com/tsipras_eu/status/615224725137133569.

²⁵ Jon Henley, "It's a Question of Dignity: Syriza Rally Demands to End 'Economic Asphyxia,'" *The Guardian*, June 29, 2015.

²⁶ Zaynab El Bernoussi, "What Price Dignity?" *Arab Awakening, Open Democracy*, October 20, 2015.

money was perceived by some of the respondents in the interviews as a worrisome trend. In the discussions, some respondents affirmed that dignity can be bought (and presented the case as obvious), and others were horrified by the notion.

In a study preceding this current research, I looked at the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 as an important moment for the rise of *karama* claims. Similar to the uprisings in 2011, *karama* claims coincided with periods of economic struggle in Egypt. This book, on the other hand, grounds theoretical premises on dignity in a postcolonial order of state and society by focusing on some of the important protesters in the 2011 Arab Uprisings in Egypt. The two cases of postcolonial and post-revolution Egypt in the 1950s and neoliberal Egypt in the 2000s revealed ongoing economic struggles in the country. These struggles concern, mainly, high rates of unemployment and rampaging poverty among the population, in the context of an increasingly capitalist world.

Demanding dignity can boost unrest, as we have seen in both 1956 and 2011 in Egypt. Therefore, can the Egyptian State ensure stability and feelings of dignity by providing jobs and reasonable social welfare packages? Can one say that countries with low unemployment rates, low levels of income inequality and high per capita GDP are better off in what concerns their feelings of dignity and perceptions thereof? Since the start of the Arab Uprisings, increasing instability has reigned over the region, where governments and regimes keep on dismantling and assembling. On the other hand, a discourse for change and dignity has been the focal point, as demands “clustered around the respect for the citizen, dignity and the natural right to participate in the making of the system that ruled over the person,” according to the fieldwork of sociologist Mohammed Bamyeh.²⁷ The emotional charge of the demands for dignity also

²⁷ Mohammed A. Bamyeh, “The Egyptian Revolution: First Impressions from the Field,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 9, Issue 7 No 1, February 14, 2011. <https://apjif.org/2011/9/7/Mohammed-Bamyeh/3486/article.html>

challenges an assumption that these societies strictly focus on materialism, which shows that both nonmaterial and material demands can be pressing and coterminous in one society and can give rise to protest for recognition, as we will see in the [following chapter](#). The [next chapter](#) is not a thematic one, but a general review of the main findings from the different themes and an analysis of the suggested framing of “dignity.”

5 Dignity Recognition, Not Status

When the people demand freedom, Destiny must surely respond.¹

Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, Tunisian poet (1909–1934)

THE LANGUAGE SETTING

Dignition, as described in the [Introduction](#) to this book, is a portmanteau between the concepts of dignity and recognition and differs from dignity in suggesting a particular invocation of dignity, stemming from the modern colonial experience and the ensuing culture of violence, that seeks recognition of a particular collective or individual identity. It is important to keep in mind the language dimension of the concept of dignity to see how people may use a form of dignition at a particular time and for a particular need. One should also question if the universality of dignity is even pertinent. Indeed, the act of imposing a universalist dimension of dignity on a society is also a way to exclude groups that do not conform to such universalist understanding of dignity, and, in this way, jeopardizes the universalist sense.

As presented in the [Introduction](#), the word “dignity” has Latin roots that refer to a Roman rank. In Arabic, on the other hand, “dignity” or “karama” has roots in the concept of generosity. The Arabic word “karama” is also a social deixis, referring to words and

¹ This verse is part of the Tunisian National Anthem that the former president of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, instituted when he took office in 1987, after a coup. The irony is that this verse was chanted against him when he fled Tunisia during the Tunisian revolution in 2011.

phrases that cannot be fully understood without additional contextual information. Words can be considered deictic if their semantic meaning is fixed, but, at the same time, their connotational meaning varies depending on the contexts of time and place (Levinson, 1983). Karama presents this deictic attribute as its semantic meaning is fixed and widely understood as an attribute related to human worth, which is the classic definition for “dignity.” However, the pragmatic uses of karama vary greatly as seen in my interviews (for example, karama as a human right versus karama as money).

The pragmatic uses of language also reveal a language–power nexus. Political scientist Janice Bially Mattern suggested that thanks to a language–power nexus used by Nasser, his language tools as well as those of British and American officials helped resolve the Suez Canal crisis without a dramatic outbreak of violence (Mattern, 2003). Mattern went on:

When actors fear the stability of their subjectivity – that is, the complex of multiple, nested and interrelated identities that make up their sense of self – they can deploy linguistic traps that force the authors of dissident representations to abandon their dissent and comply with the status quo. (*Mattern, 2003, p. 145*)

Another important language tool is a sort of technique of the Forbidden Fruit, i.e., by proscribing the calls for solidarity these very calls become even more attractive to the public. Language tools have been studied in Wittgenstein’s analysis of language games. In an attempt to translate Wittgenstein into the 2011 context in Egypt, it is important to keep in mind the socio-historical background of the protests. Indeed, previous events of anti-colonial struggle (for example, the 1956 Suez Canal crisis) and more recent anti-capitalist manifestations in Egypt help to understand today’s struggles in Egyptian social and political spheres. Nicholas Onuf’s work on speech act theory revealed another interesting use of language tools. Onuf (2012) asserted that there are three primary ways in which speech functions are used to accomplish particular social effects: (1) hegemony (asserting something

about the world that others accept or reject), (2) hierarchy (demanding from others to do something an agent said) and (3) heteronomy (promising something to others and being constrained by the promise). These social effects may be either intentional or unintentional through the agency of speech. Hence, the power potential of language is immense.

In my interviews, language is also a tool to convey memories. These could be seen as accounts of perceptions and even inferences (Levinson, 1983). The work of inference can be useful, for example, in the case of hearing a rapid knocking and deducing that it is a woodpecker (a form of knowledge extension). However, such inductive inference can also be faulty (Levinson, 1983, p. 331). Memory has therefore contrasting roles: a preservative role in relation to knowledge and a source for justification, even if misleading. Indeed, “just as sensory experience can mimic perceptions and thereby justify false beliefs about the external world, memorial experience can mimic genuine recollection and thereby justify certain false beliefs”; those beliefs have the appearance of the recollection retained in memory (Audi, 2011, p. 380).

Perceptions may be illusory not only because of an ill processing of our senses (for instance, seeing a dress as black when it is actually blue), but also from appropriating feelings by social contact. These perceptions are important in constructing what we think is a priori true and construct one of the important pillars of knowledge along with belief and justification (Audi, 2011 pp. 15–47). The exercise of responding to an interview is then not only a memory reconstruction, but also a form of cognitive rationalization in which the interviewee (who is responding) engages in a dual activity of justification to herself and to the interviewer (Legrand, 2009, pp. 99–105). The interviewees’ perceptions, oftentimes turned into expectations, represented a challenge to my understanding. For instance, the perception turned into expectation that I am a Muslim was generally exhibited by my interviewees (twenty-five out of thirty): in instances such as “you know today it is hard for us because *we* fast” and “*our* religion.” This expectation of what my religion is created a shortage of answers to

questions about religion. I want to emphasize that these feelings of sharing stemming from these perceptions turned into expectations created a sort of intimacy² with my interviewees that I felt to a lesser degree with other interviewees who did not have these same expectations.

Since this book investigates specific perceptions of a general concept, borrowed understandings of dignity were problematic. This was apparent in instances where the interviewee would claim that dignity is a human right, but, later on in the discussion, she would claim that certain people do not have dignity. We can see that this could create a form of animosity toward those who do not treat others with dignity or who do not showcase a so-called dignity (by staying “contained,” “courageous” or “dignified” to not fall into “decadence” and “cowardice”).

In the case of Egypt in 2011 and after, there is evidence (from interviews and the popular art scene) of animosity against Islamist groups. Humanist Ellen McLarney presented a case for how Islam was able to rely on artistic and literary production in Egypt to save itself from further sidelining, particularly in the case of an increasingly secularized middle class that feared a so-called backwardness of religion (2015). McLarney provided two kinds of field research examples and their viewpoints: one that is *emic* (from within the social group and from the perspective of the subject) and one that is *etic* (from outside the social group and from the perspective of the observer). McLarney promoted the need of an *emic* viewpoint to study Islam and modernity, yet she presented in her work a positionality that is very separate from her subject of study, which also essentialized her political stance of an outside observer.

Positionality, a concept that grew out of the “reflective” trend in social and cultural anthropology in the 1980s, refers to how an

² Manifestations of this intimacy were felt even more in the physical interviews (with ten out of thirty participants), in which we were near to each other and it was easy to have body contact.

anthropologist describes her own social position in relation to the people she was working with and whom she was describing (McLarney, 2015). Positionality focuses on showing and understanding the power relations that would affect the kinds of relations the researcher has with the people she works with, and, therefore, the kinds of information that can be observed. Positionality is also expressed as the effect of the subjectivity of the researcher and how she interprets what she observes and experiences (McLarney, 2015). To this one must add another important framework of understanding socioeconomic and political experiences, which is intersectionality as developed in the work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and that is particularly resounding in the 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests around the world.

DIGNITION

To frame dignity, it is necessary to first understand the difficulty in framing the concept of dignity. In this section dedicated to the idea of dignity, we will start first with some definitions of dignity and its suggested variation, dignition, which is linked to the dynamics of revolutionary change and populist demands.

Dignity is a concept scholars still grapple with. A quick look on the Google News search engine presents article titles that deal with issues of dignity from state health policies (for instance, advocating for a federal Death with Dignity Bill in the United States) to states' reaction to the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe). A global dimension of dignity seemed to arise from the reality of capitalist economies, which is the prevalent economic model in most countries (in which private ownership of forms of capital is permitted and recognized by the state). In the interviews and in the analysis of street art, blaming capitalism in creating inequality was often related to the crisis of dignity. Those who were poor or powerless lacked dignity. Scholarship exploring this question also showed that the perceptions on lack of human dignity were related to issues of the dependence of marginalized social groups on the welfare state in a system where

only the poor are perceived as those who need assistance and reinforces the distance between social groups based on their income and wealth accumulation (Bonefeld and Psychopedis, 2005).

As presented in this book, *karama*, or dignity, can symbolize different things to different people and even many things to one person. *Karama* can be self-worth, a job, a human right or simply the status of denial (meaning, daring to say no). Of course, these different senses are often linked to different contexts of unemployment, economic crisis, rise of movements for human rights and revolutions against authoritarian regimes.

Michael Rosen, in his book *Dignity*, discussed the issues of institutionalizing dignity in his chapter "The Legislation of Dignity" (2012). There, he analyzed the troubling case of a dwarf from Morsang-sur-Orge, a suburb of Paris, who had organized a dwarf-tossing competition. However, the mayor prevented him from holding the event, because he considered it to be an assault on the dignity of dwarves. The concerned dwarf retorted that it was his own will and that he did not feel that his dignity was compromised. The case was appealed several times, but the mayor prevailed. With this case, more complexities emerge when thinking about dignity as an inner worth, which, ironically, may belong to a particular group more than to the individual per se.

Dignity can, therefore, be a double-edged sword if one thinks about the difference between how people think about it and how they actually use it: it is a *cri de cœur* for some and even the weapon of victory in some cases when using human rights' claims. However, dignity can also be repressive to subjectivity, as in the case of the dwarf who wanted to be tossed, or the Egyptians who did not support the uprisings in 2011. It is, also, hard not to imagine an unconfused sense of dignity in a postcolonial state of normalized violence and oppression. This is why this book, in exploring indigenous conceptions of dignity, in moments of politics of dignity and expressions of dignity, helps in understanding a postcolonial demand for dignity and recognition. The questions that emerged from the research in this

study need to be explored, not only in theory, but also with people and the records of their memories. Interviews are the methodological foundations of this study, as they enabled me to develop an insight into people's understandings of dignity and *karama* in the context of Egypt.

In the different literatures related to the concept of dignity, one encounters a lack of theorizing of dignity and politics of dignity. In terms of institutionalizing the concept of dignity, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a steppingstone to the creation of numerous bodies dedicated to the protection of human rights, equality and dignity. However, definitions of dignity, by these different bodies, are blurred and often not even provided (Lawer, 2009). So, is it possible to theorize dignition? Yes, why not? It might be preferable to avoid theorizing such a notion in order to refrain from overdetermination. However, "dignition" intends to stress combining notions of recognition and dignity to synthesize the active and performative attributes of dignity claims in the context of social protests, such as the 2011 Arab Uprisings protests in Egypt. In defining dignition as a demand, it is important to keep in mind the politicization of dignity.

The notion of dignition that I have attempted to use was defined in a previous study, comparing the nationalization of the Suez Canal to the 2011 uprisings as two moments of politics of dignity in Egypt (El Bernoussi, 2015). The need to examine such politicization of dignity is particularly pertinent given the human consequences of the politics of dignity, particularly its Othered targets. Indeed, once a group is outside the right to recognize dignity, all types of violence toward that group can be realized. Dignition, in this analysis of the Suez Canal nationalization, was defined as a need for recognition of dignity stemming from the country's colonial experience (El Bernoussi, 2015). Here, I add *I'tikram* (إعتكram), which is an Arabic translation for dignition and again a portmanteau that plays with the words *i'tiraf* (إعتراف) – recognition – and *karama* (كرامة) – dignity – to suggest a peculiar sense for the need of recognizing dignity.

A French version for the word “dignition” would be *dignissance* from *dignité* (meaning dignity) and *reconnaissance* (meaning recognition).

An important observation in describing dignition and the need for recognition concerns the punishment and marginalization of opposition groups. In Charles Taylor’s analysis of the politics of recognition (1994) he uses the example of Quebec to show how Quebecers’ collective needs can be discriminatory to Anglo-Canadians, but still be important because these collective needs recognize the dignity of the French Canadians who have been historically marginalized. Then, Taylor, also explored in his work the marginalization of religious groups. Taylor borrowed from his work on Christianity’s turn to political secularism as a need for religion to adapt in order to save itself from further sidelining (2007). Nowadays, instead of Franch Canadians or anti- secularists fearing sidelining, we see Muslims in Quebec being in such a position and, consequently, resorting to demanding recognition and dignity (what I coin dignition).³ One of the features of dignition is its link to a demand for revolutionary change because of social sidelining.

Islamist groups are notable factions that have been marginalized from the political sphere in Egypt, particularly when looking at recent events. This context of marginalization of Islamists is not new, dating back to the time of the Crusades, which opposed the Christian and the Muslim empires. Political scientist Samuel Huntington’s approach in showing cultural origins for the clash of civilizations casts Islam in the role of an enemy to civilization, as Mahmood Mamdani explained in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2005). From this point of view, Muslims could be perceived as only “bad” because they are presented as inherently opposing Western civilization. The fragmentation of Muslim cultures, such as in Egypt, presents challenges to homogeneous construction of social and cultural understandings of dignity.

³ Hicham Tiflati’s interview with Charles Taylor, “Muslims in Quebec, Belonging to an Intercultural Society: An Interview with Charles Taylor,” *Jadaliyya*, July 18, 2015.

This fragmentation, coupled with Chatterjee's theory of the political society, undermines the anchoring of civil values that could lead to self-expression and democratic development (2011). Therefore, in the context of the 2011 revolutionary uprisings in Egypt, I suggest an understanding of dignity as "dignition," a portmanteau word merging "dignity" and "recognition," to stress the active and performative orientation of dignity claims to achieve the goals of a specific interest group.

Revolts exist on a continuum that includes contentious politics, social activism and revolutionary change. And in all cases, social movements can play a crucial role in correcting political instability. Charles Tilly compared social movements to electoral campaigns in which there is no voting but there is transmission of the political messages of the movement (1998). These messages need to be unified, numerous and committed to form networks of informal interaction in which new actors, such as the youth, can also enter the political scene (Stammers, 1999; Della Porta and Diani, 2009). Sociologist Asef Bayat considered a typology of mobilization to differentiate between protest movements and social movements. He also negates that existing orders do last a long time and asserts that social movements alter the dominant arrangement but aim to build alternative institutions and values before a total change occurs (1998). Social movements can also be much more diverse than protest movements but can lack ideological coherence. In his later work on social justice and the encroachment of the daily life, Bayat argued that people can be socially active outside of a political structure, but they become drawn into getting involved in one (referring to a political structure) when their outrage with oppression becomes unbearable and rebellion breaks out.

In the case of the 2011 revolution in Egypt, the protest movements seemed to be spontaneous and sometimes even leaderless. These movements benefited from communication technologies, yet they lacked a single coherent ideology or platform. Maybe the only coherent demand was "*Mubarak, irhal*" (meaning "Mubarak, leave").

This lack of coherence and unity presented as vulnerability and led to the marginalization of certain social groups in the post-uprisings period, such as with the case of a group of so-called free riders in the revolution (interview with Heba, [Chapter 4](#)). So, what is the future of revolutionary dynamics? According to scholar Fred Halliday who studied the Iranian revolution, there are two possibilities of everything changing or nothing changing, but in reality, the most likely scenario is having something in between with cycles of depoliticization and repoliticization (1989). In the case of Egypt, El Sisi's bringing back of the military rule proved a persistent manipulation in local politics that reflects the case of other regimes in the region, such as the one of Algeria for instance. The *American Ethnologist* issue on the 2011 Egyptian revolution (2012) gave a variety of views regarding trans-historical presumptions. For instance, Lila Abu-Lughod discussed Egyptian villagers' concern with the struggles for morality more than with the struggles for rights and democracy during the revolution, because they see their political status as unchanging, with or without the revolution (2012). Abu-Lughod seems to reveal the depoliticization of these villagers and their alienation from the revolution dynamic that was occurring.

Another feature of dignity is its link to different kinds of populist demands. In the case of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas' reaction to the claim of dignity in the same-sex rights battle in the United States, hordes of critics rose in response to his claim that the government cannot take one's dignity. For instance, actor George Takei, who was born in the United States and lived in a Japanese internment camp there during World War II, reacted by saying that this experience in his life was an example of the government's power to deny dignity to its people. Civil rights lawyer Lori Rifkin argued that not only can governments dispose of dignity but also protesters can acquire dignity in their dissent.⁴ In the discussion of same-sex marriage rights in the United States, a sociological

⁴ Lori Rifkin, "The Dignity of Dissent," *The Huffington Post*, July 2, 2015.

approach also helps to distinguish identity divergences in constructing the relationship between the same-sex marriage issue and an understanding of dignity. Indeed, the debate arose particularly in seeing an invented right to equality and dignity that is not clearly constitutional.⁵

The need to legislate a claim for dignity is also used in the battle for legalizing euthanasia (what is referred to as the “Death with Dignity” bill) as well as against the institutional troika⁶ in the case of the Greek debt issue. Using the demand to recognize dignity is, therefore, a way to blackmail an opposition party and reach one’s goals. Indeed, *i’ tikram* or dignition is a blackmailing tool, as it plays the card of the undisputable demand for human dignity and the institutionalization of dignity as a universal human right.

IDENTITY, POLITICS, AND EMOTIONS

The theme of materialism appeared first to be the most central to *karama* demands due to the relevance of economic inequalities and inabilities to spread fair access to the benefits of neoliberal reforms in Egypt and in numerous other countries of the Arab region. However, this research has revealed an unexpected finding (to me at least) concerning the importance of identity issues related to *karama* demands. In this section, we start by looking at how discussions of identity in the Arab and Egyptian contexts have political drivers, particularly in the processes of modernizing Arab states after the colonial period. Then we focus on how emotive discussions of articulating the demand of dignity reveal issues of identity for protesters.

⁵ In this article, the author stresses the nonexistence of the term “dignity” in the US Constitution, while the US Supreme Court claimed to grant the same-sex marriage rights as a constitutional right. David Davenport, “The Supreme Court’s Newly Invented Right to Equal Dignity and the Problems It Will Cause,” *Forbes*, July 8, 2015.

⁶ The term “Troika” refers to the tripartite organization that negotiates the Greek debt repayment plans and is composed of the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission.

The topic of national identity has been central in postcolonial studies, as identity is essential to the creation and establishment of a stable nation and state in the aftermath of decolonization. However, doubts and insecurities about national identity can create traumas that affect the social, cultural and economic development of decolonized peoples. In *Overstating the Arab State* (1996), author Nazih Ayubi dealt with the problem of a fragmented identity in the post-colonial context and argued about a pathological obsession with identity as a cultural theme common in the contemporary academic field of Middle Eastern studies.

Nevertheless, Kumaraswamy (2006) and Sadiki (2004) both saw in this obsession with identity a common sociological problem of an indeterminate national identity in the Arab world. Therefore, this aspect of the identity issue in the region needs to be accounted for in order for the politics of the contemporary Middle East to be understood. Moreover, Ayubi also emphasized that the main cause of this identity problem in the region is the “the absence of a championing social class,” meaning a large social class whose interests are represented in the state and market policies (1996, p. 148). The identity issue in the region is also related to the social context because people often related their identity to important bonds, like those of the family. In this respect, even *karama* in its culturally specific context is informed by social relationships in a dialectic way. There is also a recurrent theme of humiliation in identity formation, most notably enforced in the more recent experiences of Syrian refugees in the region (Zeno, 2017).

In the case of the Arab Uprisings, social media helped in keeping people connected from within and from outside of the events.⁷ Globalization has also enforced transnational identities, meaning forms of self-identification with traits specific to several identified

⁷ Several publications discuss the role of social media in spreading the Arab Uprisings, and one of the worthy ones is Waheed Ahmed Alhindi, Muhammad Talha and Bin Sulong Ghazali, “The Role of Modern Technology in Arab Spring,” *Archives Des Sciences* 65, no. 8 (2012).

groups beyond states (Scholte, 2005). Arab identity is one example of a transnational identity central to the events of the Arab Uprisings, as seen with the symbols of solidarity and friendship with other Arab countries during the protests. Unlike Scholte's argument on the galvanization of these transnational identities to create common understandings, this study shows that this is far from true in the particular case of dignity. The findings in this research show a multiplicity of understandings that also stresses the importance of the epistemological frameworks of social groups, in which their understanding of a concept like dignity can be backed by reason, life experiences or religion, for instance.

In June 2013, after a year in power, the Muslim Brotherhood President Morsi was toppled amidst slogans that read *irhal min masrīna* (meaning "leave our Egypt"), similar to the ones used to topple Mubarak's regime. The Muslim Brotherhood members were also portrayed in the local State media not as Egyptians but as aliens in their country. They were often demonized in social networks as seen with a cartoon showing the Brotherhood using a niqab-wearing woman as a shield and an infant as a human bomb and faced by the brave and chivalrous Egyptian army that protects a woman and her baby.

At the other end of the spectrum of culturally specific considerations used in constructing identities, universalism has served the models of modernization to reach different peoples. In the Arab world, modernity has been associated with the colonial project. However, in applying modernity to local cultures, new modernities emerged. This concept of multiple modernities presented for historian Ussama Makdisi the origin of normalized violence, masculinity and sectarianism in Lebanon (2000). Makdisi defined a modern masculinity as a Cartesian mind (with brain skills being associated with masculinity) as opposed to a bodily and emotional expression (with emotional skills being associated with femininity). Makdisi's theory on modernities explained that the increasing conflicts among different ethnic groups, in post-independence Lebanon, were a result of a masculine modernity and the need to unify for more efficient governance.

Concerning the Middle East, sociologist Wendy Pearlman studied the experiences of state oppression in the region to find that emotions and emboldening those emotions were important to rethinking the meaning and the making of social movements (2013). She particularly focused on the Arab Uprisings and found that despite people's different ideologies, there was a united claim for dignity in the revolutions. In Pearlman's research, several respondents attested that the Arab Uprisings revolutions in the region were held in the name of dignity and that they viewed dignity as an emotional claim. The emotional claim of dignity enabled people to act and also boosted nationalist sentiments across the region (2013).

The emotional power of dignity claims also presents dangers of an ambivalent understanding of dignity that excludes and oppresses the Other. The case of social movements protesting during the Arab Uprisings can present an example of this ambivalence in the meaning of dignity and the resulting propensity for violence. In this context, the use of politics of dignity can help to manipulate individuals in a social group to join a violent action in the name of dignity.⁸

In *Consuming Desires* (2010), Frances Hasso emphasized the importance of alternative spaces of politics, within a state, for the expression of emotional claims, such as *karama*. It is also important to differentiate between "civil" and "social" spaces as different fields of meaning and practice in post-revolutionary Egypt (Hasso and Salime, 2016). For Hasso, the aim of a space under the authority of the state is to enable the state to govern and to structure the way in which individuals interact with each other (2010, p. 10). Hasso relies on Foucault's governmentality approach (referring to the way with which people are taught to govern themselves) to show that the state is the most important site for the exercise of power, which extends beyond the public space to reach private spaces, like families. Indeed,

⁸ Francis Fukuyama's book *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* makes such a point and shows that such needs are particularly salient for repressed nationalist groups and in the case of political Islam.

to govern in this sense is to structure the possible fields of action of others (Foucault, 1982, pp. 789–790). In this respect, historian Derek Sayer called the state a discursive marker of unity (1987). The field of international relations is one in which a particular attention is dedicated to the mechanics of power. Indeed, even in critical scholarship in the field, political spaces in current societies do not seem to actively integrate moral considerations. This leads to sustaining a prioritization of power over moral values (Campbell and Shapiro, 1999).

Another concept explored by Foucault, concerning the power of the State, is the concept of biopolitics, which explains a form of productive power that is essential to governmentality and targets subjectivities and bodies (Hasso, 2010, p. 28). For instance, statistics with data on births and mortality are tools to regulate and transform societies and not only to represent them. These are some methods of this governmentality, used in Egypt as well, that serve more as power in the Machiavellian sense (by increasing the fear of the state) than in a “pastoral” sense as defined by Foucault (Hasso, 2010).

In the case of *karama* as a popular claim, it becomes almost natural that such politicized claim will be subjected to the state’s authority. Once it becomes clear that protecting *karama* is the state’s responsibility, thanks to legislation, for instance, the original claim of *karama*, as a self-expression, may lose its value to become a routine function of the state. This would enlarge the State’s ownership of individuals’ bodies and emotions.

ISSUES OF DEVELOPMENT

Issues of development are intricately linked to materialism but also linked to the connection between the development project and the backdrop of modernization of societies and states for more efficient resource extraction. As we see in this section, the dynamics of modernity and development are also accelerated with globalization as a process of increasing state participation in an integrated world economy that is primarily capitalist (Palan, 2013).

Apart from a need to be aware of positionality as seen earlier in the post-data collection reflections, studying economic modernity is also heavily reliant on economic sensitivities. The works of Walt Whitman Rostow paved the way for development models intended to modernize the postcolonial world. Rostow's work on stages of economic growth (1960) presented a cycle of development inspired by the European industrial revolution and was, of course, heavily criticized for not taking into account the peripheral condition of most of the Global South's economies. Marxist economist Samir Amin criticized the Eurocentricism of Rostow's model and its aims of anchoring a global capitalist model in which inequalities and social injustice are inherent.⁹

Multiple or plural modernities are one answer to rebuttals of the modernization theory that is anchored in the development and expansion of the capitalist model.¹⁰ In this regard, an important amount of critical scholarship dealing with modernity and tradition presents a problematic frame for understanding economics, culture and history more broadly. Similarly, the focus on *karama* in post-colonial Egypt also presents an interesting case in which the issues of economics, culture and history intermingle with one's experience of modernity.

A study on *karama*/dignity is also important for development theories, as there is increasing attention in the field paid to subjectivity and agency. Ernesto Sirotli is a noted authority in this field of development, whose experiences in Africa (and later on in New Zealand) led him to conclude that helping marginalized communities requires first to "shut up and listen" (1999). Indeed, patronizing development institutions that oftentimes were led by officers from former

⁹ See Amin, Samir, "Accumulation on a World Scale," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 5, no. 4 (1975): 478–483.

¹⁰ Several points in this section were discussed in different lectures given during the joint graduate seminar "Critical Genealogies of the Middle East," taught by both Dr. Frances Hasso (Duke University) and Dr. Nadia Yaqub (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

colonial institutions were less likely to listen and more likely to give instructions. Listening is, therefore, important, not only to engineer more suitable development plans, but also to understand the different conceptions of dignity, as my research approach suggests.

Sociologist Raewyn Connell suggested, in regard to postcolonialism and development, a Southern theory. To explain this theory, Connell refers to issues of power, violence and the pains of neocolonialism, and she explained that the ideology of modernization, a central ideology to the project of colonialism, “is entrenched in the postcolonial middle classes and in the postcolonial state, which is now – at least in the case of India and Sri Lanka – more developmentalist than it was at independence” (Connell, 2007, p. 189). A notable critic of development, Ashis Nandy, explained that the ideology of modernization is profoundly destructive of pre-existing cultures in the sense that it reengineers them, keeping only the features from these cultures that are acceptable and adequate to the psychological demands of modernity. Nandy went on to say that this reengineering mocks the knowledge of those preexisting cultures. These cultures’ knowledge enabled them to survive in their environment. This mocking reduces the credibility of the militants of these cultures in defending their cause (that of the necessity of protecting preexisting cultures) against the developmentalist state (2003, pp. 151–170).

Local grassroots movements against international development programs, tailored around the project of modernity, were not only a concern in India and Sri Lanka, as seen with Nandy. In South Africa, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an anti-capitalist movement founded in late 2013, denounces neoliberal development policies in South Africa and claims a Fanonian approach in their anti-imperialist message. They also rely on Stephen Biko’s teachings of black consciousness, particularly in the following statement:

The basic tenet of black consciousness is that the black man must reject all value systems that seek to make him a

foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity.¹¹

The EFF also introduced a “Thomas Sankara Oath” to give tribute to the influence of the late Marxist president of Burkina Faso, who fought imperialism and also insisted on restoring the dignity of his population. This oath includes the observance of an austere way of life and support for women’s emancipation. Sankara was very vocal about women’s rights and feminism as a political ideology. He even instituted in 1984, while he was president, a day in which he asked Burkinabe men to perform women’s traditional tasks. Sankara was assassinated in a coup d’état in 1987. To restore dignity, Sankara’s ideology was, in some way, to reverse the events that humiliated the local population and limit dependence on former imperial powers. This idea of reversing historical events to restore dignity was also claimed by Frantz Fanon (1961) and Aimé Césaire (1955). Sankara’s presidency and leadership, in a sense, gave the state an interest in restoring people’s dignity. This is similar to the Nasserite State in which a primary goal was to restore the dignity of the nation (as opposed to the dignity of an individual).

Before the Arab Uprisings events, political scientist Vincent Durac described the Arab world as a stable political order, where leaders boasted longevity in office, either in monarchical systems or authoritarian republics that usually adopted liberalized economic policies (2013). These political systems also relied on Arab nationalism. Yet, Durac argued that prior to the Arab Uprisings, some movements from the region battled for the need for revolutionary change. The *Kefaya* movement in Egypt, for instance, denounced the undemocratic political system as early as 2004 and particularly the political deliberalization in Egypt. Scholar Steven Heydemann, when he was at the United States Institute of Peace, talked, on the other hand, about

¹¹ Stephen Bantu Biko was a major anti-apartheid activist in South Africa. He founded the Black Consciousness Movement and died in a Pretoria prison on September 12, 1977.

an authoritarian upgrading in the case of the region before the Arab Uprisings that was accompanied by a controlled process of political liberalization (2007). This process was needed in the case of regimes seeking international linkages and patronage. In the Arab Uprisings, many regimes in power legitimized their authoritarian style as necessary for political stability. Indeed, the protest movements in the Arab Uprisings were not able to produce governance, let alone democratization (Schlumberger and Matzke, 2012). In a more global consideration, economist Wolfgang Streeck is even considering the coming demise of capitalism as an outcome of global governance issues. He links this prediction to the global decrease of the rate of economic growth, strengthening of political oligarchies, a broken social contract linked to inconsistent trends between productivity and income increase, a moral decline due to an economy of greed and corruption and, finally, an international anarchy in which no political agency can effectively confront digression (2014).

Conclusion

It is important here to summarize some findings along with the transdisciplinary considerations and implications in this research. The materialist dimension was initially one of the most promising avenues to understand problems of dignity because of ill-implemented neoliberal policies in many Arab countries. However, it seemed that the materialist dimension did not give a complete picture, as the emotional dimension of identity seemed to be a stronger lead-in understanding the demands of *karama* in the 2011 Arab Uprisings and particularly the memory of those events, potent even today. But despite the fact that identity politics may have played out significantly in the articulation of dignity demands, they also carry limitations in excluding other identity groups, which jeopardizes the political strength of dignity claims as catchall political demands.

In the discussions of *karama* throughout this book, it appears that there is a problem with an understanding of *karama* as an intrinsic human right at the expense of an understanding of *karama* as meritocratic. Moreover, the strength of the argument of *karama* as related to Arab identity suggests a resilience of a cultural-specific understanding of a universalized concept and the need to recognize one's identity in the context of global supranational identities. This cultural argument needs to be taken into account in the analysis of international relations to adopt considerations of cultural-specific understandings of central concepts such as *karama* and dignity (such concept of dignity being heavily used in international development, in particular). One important suggestion to face this challenge is to promote non-identitarian political discourses, specifically in the context of protest movements (Fraser, 1997). For this, it would be supportive to caution the politicization of *karama* or dignity claims

and of *i'tikram* or dignity and emphasize the relevance of the institutionalization of dignity in the field of bioethics, for example.¹

Throughout the book, adopting a transdisciplinary approach was useful for dealing with the nebulous nature of a concept like *karama*/dignity. When looking at other works wedding dignity considerations with humanitarian action, I came across the work of Evelin Lindner, a transdisciplinary scholar who dedicated her career to fighting humiliation and restoring dignity. She believes that not focusing on dignity prevents us from building a decent world community commensurate with the levels of technological and scientific progress achieved so far (Lindner, 2006).

One can also see that it is almost “innate” to show some form of reactionary behavior if one senses her dignity, or that intrinsic value that makes one human, is violated. From Lindner’s work and other works used in this study (Nussbaum, 2000; Lawer, 2009), the focus on dignity that this research suggested is also relevant to the field of human rights and bioethics (also explored in the [previous chapter](#) on *karama* as a human right). Indeed, Donna Hicks, best-selling author of *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict* (2011) and human rights and conflict resolution expert, has founded the *Declare Dignity* project, funded by the TED Prize and calls for signatures from the global community to:

[Proudly display] your commitment to treat yourself and others as worthy human beings who deserve fair treatment, recognition, acceptance of identity and seven other elements which are our birthright.²

Hicks’ work on dignity is groundbreaking because it is the result of decades of working in conflict-ridden parts of the world and observing

¹ In the following encyclopedia entry, we touch upon the need for a dignity-sensitive approach to bioethics: Zaynab El Bernoussi and Baudouin Dupret, “Bioethics in Egypt,” *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, 2017. www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t343/e0248.

² Excerpt from Donna Hicks’ the *Declare Dignity Project*, 2015.

positive developments in conflict resolution when addressing psychic wounds of dignity that hurt just as much as physical wounds (Hicks, 2011). Hicks' latest book, *Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture That Brings Out the Best in People* (2018), takes the same groundbreaking method of recognizing the ten essential elements³ of dignity to the workplace to promote a more humanistic management of resources and human capital. The concept of dignity is also useful in rethinking humans' relationship with their environment and ecology. Indeed, the concept of dignity has supported nontheological ways to assert the moral value of human beings, because dignity explains humans' worth and difference from other entities, living and nonliving. Using these principles of dignity as worth and difference, we can see how the institutionalization of human rights promotes equality between co-citizens but not yet with nature, which we should be more aware of to understand our relationship with nature and failures in cohabitation with it (Dienstag, 2020).

Research on dignity is also important for the study of democracy, since democratic processes are based on human rights protections (Nussbaum, 2000). Here, it is also important to remember the need for a flourishing civil society to achieve democracy, as suggested by scholar Robert Putnam, among others (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti, 1994). Indeed, the 2011 uprisings witnessed the birth of new social movements in Egypt and the rebirth of those that had been suppressed. Indeed, the Serbian Otpor! movement trained a number of young activists in the January 25 revolution in Egypt, and the fighting fist symbol of the movement was prominently represented in the street art during the uprisings. The dynamics of social movements and their

³ Donna Hicks presented the Dignity Model (2011), based on the ten essential elements of dignity, as follows: acceptance of identity, recognition, acknowledgment, inclusion, safety, fairness, independence, understanding, benefit of the doubt and accountability. She then added (2018) ten temptations to violate dignity: taking the bait, saving face, shrinking responsibility, seeking false dignity, seeking false security, avoiding conflict, being the victim, resisting feedback, blaming and shaming others to deflect your own guilt and engaging in false intimacy and demeaning gossip.

global connections could, therefore, explain the different symbols and credos used in the 2011 protests in Egypt.

The regime led by the Islamists in 2012 in Egypt received much resistance from liberals (moderates) and secularists, who feared that the Islamists would be unable to establish a liberal democracy.⁴ On July 3, 2013, after weeks of mounting tensions and protests, the military intervened to remove President Mohamed Morsi, the first democratically elected president in Egypt, from his functions and proceeded to make his arrest. Turkey was particularly vocal in opposing such a military coup that involved the use of force to cancel out the outcome of a democratic process, in which the Muslim Brotherhood took power through the ballot box. The leaders of a number of Gulf countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, on the other hand, welcomed the coup.⁵

The European Union and the United States expressed deep concerns about the coup, but did not oppose the military action.⁶ This resulted in an implied US and European support for the military intervention to oust the Muslim Brotherhood, which boosted feelings of foreign oppression in the pro-Morsi side. Indeed, violent clashes ensued and resulted in the killing of many civilians. Since December 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood has also been declared a terrorist organization by the current military-backed regime, and on March 24, 2014, 529 pro-Morsi activists were sentenced to death.⁷ As stated earlier in this study, in 2015, ex-president Morsi was also sentenced to death, but the verdict was overturned in 2016, after a strong outcry from pro-Morsi groups and also from several pro-human rights activist groups. In 2017, Hosni Mubarak was acquitted over a 2011 protester's killing. While still on trial, and during a court hearing in June

⁴ David Hearst's article, "Sisi Must Go, Before It's Too Late," *Huffington Post*, November 12, 2015. www.huffpost.com/entry/sisi-must-go-before-it-is_b_8545480.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kent Klein, "Obama Orders Review of US Aid to Egypt After Morsi Ousted," *Voanews.com*, July 3, 2013.

⁷ Patrick Kingsley, "Egypt Sentences to Death 529 Supporters of Mohamed Morsi," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2014.

2019, Morsi collapsed and was later pronounced dead, reportedly of a heart attack. Morsi's son, Abdullah, who had also been imprisoned after the coup for allegedly spreading false news and belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, also died of a heart attack a little over two months after his father.⁸ These deaths not only shocked many inside Egypt and beyond, but also stirred up the controversy over conditions of detention in Egypt. It is important to remember here that in discussing the coup and post-coup eras in Egypt, there are many blind spots that remain and that are difficult to investigate, particularly since there has been sporadic reporting and limited academic analysis of these events. David Kirkpatrick's 2018 book on Egypt captures the late Morsi era authoritatively, given the author's on-the-ground experience with the Arab Uprisings events in Egypt. Kirkpatrick shows how authoritarianism can be self-defeating and explains how the political development of the country is an important indicator for the evolution of the Arab region's political integration.

To present a conclusion to this book, it is important to keep in mind the centrality of theoretical "dignity" in current political philosophy, as it is both important and somewhat contentious (Nussbaum, 2000). Moreover, the association between the concept of dignity and the rise of the human rights discourse, as part of the modernity project, prompts a critical engagement with the concept. Indeed, the turn to "post-structuralism" that came out of the crisis of representation in anthropology in the 1980s unveiled that the old idea of a coherent "native's point of view" (as discussed by Clifford Geertz) was overturned because it presented a simplistic view of the world. This simplistic view summarized the world into a discrete set of cultural "worldviews," each with its own tidy logic. This view ignores interactions and interminglings between cultures.

⁸ Associated Press in Cairo, "Son of Former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi Dies Aged 25," *The Guardian*, September 5, 2019. www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/05/son-former-egyptian-president-mohamed-morsi-abdullah-dies-25.

The methodological study of cultural dynamics as historical processes, rather than as stable “structures of meaning,” is increasingly important in the current context of accelerated globalization. In this respect, this book was inspired by a research project comparing two historical events in Egypt occurring at different times, but in the same place, affording an opportunity to say something very concrete about what changes and what stays the same at the level of political meaning, interpretation, discourse and culture in the face of trans-historical presumptions. When focusing on the 2011 revolution in Egypt, the idea was to develop an empirically dense picture of the politics of *karama* – a politics of *karama* within a cultural process located in a very specific place and time.

Another important consideration in this book concerns the implications of *karama* and dignity for sociological theory. The philosophical dimension of *karama* presents a link with sociological studies as advanced by Craig Calhoun. Calhoun (1996) showed how sociological theory has earlier roots than one might realize, and it has its roots in philosophy. In this respect, it is important to return to Rousseau’s definition of self-expression and self-consciousness as manifestations of a need to participate, as a personal unit, in a viable democratic society. Tocqueville’s admiration for democracy in the young nation of the United States of America was due to the social advancements he saw there. Indeed, Tocqueville identified that social structure was the foundation of democracy and not just the idealized form of it (2002 [1835]).

Bahia Shehab’s work on negation and uttering no as reaffirming one’s *karama* is also revealing to other global movements that object and negate capitalist policies (Occupy movements, for instance) or heteronormative mores (LGBTQ+ rights movements) in the name of dignity. For instance, in 2015, the Greek prime minister Tsipras called for the no vote against the European austerity program as a way to protect the dignity of the Greek people, in the same way Vaclav Havel opposed dictatorship in Czechoslovakia to protect dignity decades earlier.

This suggestion of a demand for dignity in the Egyptian context, termed *i'tikram*, is related to the notion of politics of recognition in which a group of people demands political recognition from the state (Taylor, 1994). This notion of a need for state recognition is studied in realist and neorealist approaches in international relations that stress a political group's fundamental interest in acquiring more power leverage. Power considerations can, therefore, motivate dignity claims that emerge during political events, keeping in mind the importance of power in the study of politics and international relations. As a result, *i'tikram*, or dignition, also suggests the ambivalence of dignity claims that can exclude other groups and normalize violence against them. Finally, in this suggestion of dignition, there is "ignition" ... as with the case of sparking a revolution!

When looking at the 2011 protests in Egypt, an important dimension to study concerns the analysis of social movements and the use of sociological examination of the political events of the revolutionary uprisings. The interviews that I conducted, as well as the human expressions of art, music and cinema that I analyzed and that are related to the protests, revealed that individuals with affiliations to specific social movements feel the need to explain their motives in joining the uprisings. Moreover, the respondents' different affiliations, along with their diverse backgrounds, bring sense to the objects of inquiry – the understandings of *karama* – in this study. However, other important findings were also revealed, such as the power of language and the importance of social dynamics in modernity and globalization.

To end with a final quote from the interviewees, I got back in touch with Waleed for some of his thoughts about *karama* demands in Egyptian society today (Waleed was a student and engaged with the *Kefaya* movement in the 2011 protests, and he now works in both Cairo and Dubai):

I think that in 2011 there was definitely a concern for *karama* in the Egyptian society at all levels. With the Muslim Brotherhood, this

concern was sidelined because the attention was geared toward the threat of having an Islamist state in Egypt. But in June 30, 2013, there was a loss of confidence (*"foqdan thiqat al-nafs"*) so the second revolution was to correct the mistake. After 2011 and today, there is no place for karama. People saw a lot of blood. There is only place for fear.

Looking at how the politics of dignity are used to uphold authoritarian systems is very useful academically. This has been a blind spot in those social and political theories whose authors and practitioners speak from within a Western cultural framework that often does not understand the relevance of such politics in contexts like Egypt. The need to study karma is timely and this book brought some compelling conclusions, particularly regarding understanding dignity as a traumatic experience (see Matthies-Boon, 2017). The book also brought out the complexity of authoritarian politics in modern Egypt, which seems to be seeping into the future as well.

Calls for dignity continue in Egypt, showing recurrent demands and protests in the Arab world and the Global South. The context of the international claims for dignity used by the Occupy movements, same-sex marriage activists and pro-euthanasia activists, among other human rights activists, undoubtedly benefited the 2011 karama demand in Egypt. The weak recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis also exposed the limits of the neoliberal development model even further. Indeed, the model has expanded inequalities, creating further marginalization of large groups in the many societies. Even when growth was achieved in the local economy, it most often meant increased precarity over prosperity. The hypocrisy of the neoliberal development discourse with indecent inequalities is a clear blow to the dignity of citizens, as the welfare of the many is sacrificed to enrich the few.

The different protest movements worldwide at the time of the Arab Uprisings often included symbols of anarchism and resistance to the state, particularly the police, but also calls for recognition

(Fukuyama, 2018). This increasing signalling of anarchism in global protests relates to a growing obsolescence of statism with accelerated globalization (Scholte, 2005). The state is not only challenged by local civil society, but also by all sorts of foreign or international groups that benefit from instantaneous connectivity and uncensored communication channels and social media.

The uses of *karama* as a term in political discourse in the context of Egypt are much related to the history of the modern state and its struggles with development. This phenomenon of modern state struggle with economic development pertains to a global phenomenon of a capitalist crisis in the context of accelerated trade liberalization (Streeck, 2014). Associating uprisings, revolutions and protests with dignity (and, particularly, a lack of it) is not unusual. For instance, the May Fourth Movement in the early twentieth century was reportedly an important anti-imperialist movement in China that demanded dignity for the Chinese people (Schwarcz, 1986). On August 8, 1942, Mahatma Gandhi's speech calling the British to "Quit India" (originally in English) posed the question, "[w]here has all that dignity, that nobility of spirit, disappeared now?" to show that there was a distinct problem with dignity in Indian society. On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr., the leader of the American Civil Rights Movement, stated in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech that "[w]e can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: 'For Whites Only.'" These are examples from other contexts and from other times. So those signifiers ought to be contextualized; however, it is important to see that notions of dignity keep on being mobilized in moments of power struggle and resistance.

In our times of interconnectedness through the internet that provides substantial access to news outlets and public fora, awareness of what is happening in the world seems to have become easier than ever before. After the first few months of the Arab Uprisings, the Indignados movement in Spain started its dignity marches on May 15, 2011. The movement's official webpage quoted the work of

Stéphane Hessel (2010), *Indignez-vous* (translated into English as *Time for Outrage*), and that preceded the Arab Uprisings. This work launched a surge of outrage against crony capitalism and widening economic inequalities in Europe and suggested the need for people's outcry against the status quo to lead a positive change. On September 17, 2011, the first protests of the Occupy Wall Street movement began at Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, and several news outlets reported that the movement was also inspired by Hessel's book. Occupy Wall Street expanded to become a global movement in other parts of the world, and particularly with the global protest of October 15, 2011. Feminist activist Judy Rebick called this global movement "Occupy This" (2012). She reported links between the Occupy movements; one example was the Occupy Central in Hong Kong that also began on October 15, 2011. Similar to the Arab Uprisings protests in Egypt, the Occupy movements targeted economic issues, undemocratic government practices and increasing inequality in their respective societies and, most importantly, demanded democracy, social justice and dignity (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013). The loudest voices of the struggles were those of the youth, as this group suffers the most from global precarity and unemployment. In his 2014 book, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, which reflected on the Arab Uprisings, the late Roger Owen concluded that one of the important takeaways from this historic episode in the region is the end of Arab exceptionalism. The resonance of the Egyptian karama demand with global dignity protests around the world is particularly illustrative of Owen's insightful argument.

The dignity/karama demand functions as a mobilizing and discursive vehicle to advance different social/political/economic claims in Egypt by making particular needs a systematic priority if they are attached to karama. For instance, if I claim that the state impedes my ability to marry and I relate such demand to my dignity as a human being, this creates an outrage among my peers and even other victims of dignity assaults. This connection builds a bridge between different protesters' claims and creates, sometimes, an illusion of unity. But if

the underlying demands in claiming karama are different, this is likely to create a problem of pursuing particular agendas. Thus, demanding karama might become a game of whose demand is more pressing, or presented as such. In Egypt in 2011, the demand for karama was urgent. It remains so today, in Egypt and beyond.

Our world has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic; in 2020, the region was rocked by the Beirut port explosion; and my country, Morocco, has recently resumed relations with Israel, which has been promoted as a peace deal, but actually jeopardizes Arab unity. In these times of screaming inequalities and polarizing politics, remembering the utility of dignity as an approach to treating one another is of utmost importance, because even a flicker of empathy can light up an abyss of animosity. And that helps.

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